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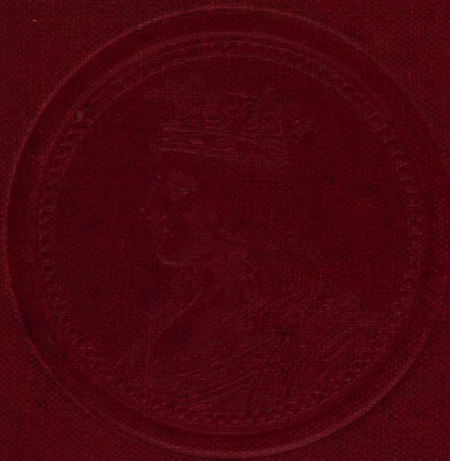

THE WHITE QUEEN

RUSSELL GARTHER

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THE WHITE QUEEN

BY

RUSSELL GARNIER

AUTHOR OF "HIS COUNTERPART"

LONDON AND NEW YORK

HARPER & BROTHERS

45 ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1899

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THE WHITE QUEEN

CHAPTER I

CUPID AT COURT

It was a moot question whether Charles Brandon, Viscount Lisle, or rather Duke of Suffolk as he had just been created, were the head of his family. At any rate there was no other nobleman of his name, no other as debonair and accomplished, and, more to the point still, no other who would have had three such rufflers in his train as his kinsmen Tony, Ralph and Roger.

Tony, the eldest and master spirit, had inherited much of the Brandon beauty, which, coupled with his daring, won him favour with either sex. Ralph, the next in age, was a taciturn giant, slow to wrath, yet when estranged a dangerous foe, when endeared a precious friend. Roger, the youngest,

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was one of those lucky wights who get lightly into trouble and out again, nobody knows how, unless because his shortness of stature afforded him some licence.

Now, in the year of grace 1514, and the sixth of Henry, eighth king of the name, about the season of Couchmas, that is to say late spring, Suffolk being just back from a State mission to the Netherlands, was having sundry audiences of the King at Greenwich, and on one occasion had brought the three brothers with him. They were not long flown from their Lincolnshire eyrie, and this was a *terra incognita* to them. "Heaven alone knows what my troublesome haggards will be up to if left unhooded in a palace," soliloquised their master, and so he ordered them to remain outside.

They had not long ceased to gaze up at the noble pile before such loiterers as they began to get out of the way. The gate-wards sprang to attention and an usher with a white wand stalked backwards down a long flight of steps to where some grooms had led up horses furnitured for riding. At first the brothers were too intent on watching if the usher would accomplish his feat without breaking his neck to see that their lord had begun to back down also with his hand in that of one of

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the prettiest maids in England. But, when they did catch sight of the pair, it was all eyes, as the saying is, to note how Charles Brandon would comport himself with this dainty piece of porcelain. He took monstrous pains to seat the lady in her saddle, and it was apparently Court manners to stare her out of countenance, and then out of sight; but at last he signed to the trio for his own barb and rode off.

A silent party were they most of the road back to Southwark, and it is doubtful if a word would have been spoken had not Tony given lip to his thoughts.

"Asking your Grace's pardon for the liberty," said he, "have we not just left behind a worthier mate for the chief of our house than that foreign dame, Emperor's daughter though she be?"

You are to understand that the gossip of the time coupled their lord's name with that of Margaret, Regent of the Netherlands, especially since his late visit to her Court. But in the esteem of true Englishmen like these brothers a noble lady of their own race would be a still more peerless bride. What was more, they considered their lord capable of winning any mate he wanted. "He is no costril in a marriage flight," had been their expression, "and may be king himself some day if

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he stoop as deftly as he soars." At all events he did not scout Tony's daring impeachment.

"Truly, coz, you have hit the clout this shot," he replied, "but do you know who the lady is? Why, the King's sister, Mary Tudor."

"And does her Highness favour you?" pursued the irrepressible Tony.

"Out! man; you ask what only a coxcomb would answer."

"Then, that will I," cried Roger, "for onlookers see most of the game."

"Yes?" asked Suffolk invitingly as Roger hesitated.

"Oh, nothing, my lord, but that I noticed when your hand touched hers she flushed as if stricken with the red plague, and when you whispered in her ear paled as does the lily when the sun is off it."

"Boy, you are a born poet: and what then?"

"And then I turned my back."

"How discreet! The passage was too tender for others' eyes? But your imagination has been running riot. Know now that the bride you have found for me is already bespoken—some say by Charles of the Netherlands, others Louis of France."

"Pah!" burst in Tony disgustedly, "these alien

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princes snap up all that is best in England. What can my lord of Lincoln be about?"

"Oh, Wolsey worships at another altar than that of Venus. A royal espousal to him is but a successful campaign, a divorce the loss or gain of a province. We break hearts nowadays in lieu of lances."

"But at least these foreign suitors are goodly men like you, my lord?" ventured Tony.

"You shall judge for yourself, cousin. The one is a sickly boy, the other a slouching dotard." Then growing indignant, "Cry shame on those who favour either match — with Charles the dolorous, who needs a physician more than a wife, or with the pocky Louis, who should be thinking of a bed in the ground instead of a bridal one. Gentlemen, I tell you that every time I picture the cadaverous cheeks of the one or the slobbering lips of the other in touch with that fair flower I feel—I feel——" Here he broke off and spurred his courser so roughly that he reared and pawed the air, then burst into such violent curvettings that any less able rider must have been unseated.

As the brothers beheld the masterly manner in which he controlled the brute's passions they inwardly compared him to those rivals of his of whom he had been speaking. Maybe that had

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been his intention, but he could not have foreseen the momentous consequences of the comparison.

Now, since his kinsmen had donned his livery their conduct had been befitting a novice qualifying for the tonsure rather than three squires the accolade. Indeed, Charles Brandon, who had been led to expect something far different, was only afraid that it was the precursor of a worse outbreak than ever outraged the feelings of the old folk in Lincolnshire. And he was not far wrong, though as yet they did but watch in lazy contentment his rapid rise to power. It was when a check to his majestic ambition seemed likely that they got out of hand.

The Lady Mary's match with Louis of France soon came to be discussed openly not only at Court, but in Mart and Moot. So far from Suffolk showing signs of entering the lists where so fair a prize was to be the result of successful rivalry, he shut himself up at Southwark, and behaved like a man in the sulks. That kind of behaviour, when so formidable an antagonist as a king had taken the field against him, did not jump with his cousins' humour. It was not, they said, befitting the head of the Brandons. He could be daring enough when self-interest engaged his energies. Now he was no more put out than

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when his ward, the heiress of the Lisles, had renounced her marriage pact with him, and that, it was hinted, though a blow to his vanity, had been a gain to his ambition. In short, the brothers began to fear that their lord saw no more in a woman's love than did the Bishop of Lincoln. As yet they felt little interest in Mary Tudor beyond disgust at her being slighted by any one of their name, and at the unworthy fate in store for so much loveliness. True, they were in the mood for a service of knight-errantry, but any damsel in distress would have answered the purpose. Such were their sentiments and nothing deeper when circumstances led them Greenwichwards again.

It happened that just at this period his Grace of Norfolk came to lodge there with a goodly train, amongst which were two other Brandons, Lettice and Wilfred. These being born and bred on his Duchy counted themselves of the Howard faction. Since, however, their namesake had become so famous the Lincolnshire cousins thought they ought to acknowledge him as their feudal superior. Blood, argued the brothers, is thicker than water, and therefore Charles Brandon has the prior claim. "No," was the retort, "your head of the family was our equal only yesterday, whereas we Kenninghall Brandons have done homage to a Howard for

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generations past." But the brothers did not now repair to Greenwich to carry on the dispute. Far otherwise: Tony and Lettice were lovers of old standing, and they had taken to renewing their troth under the trees in Greenwich Park. Yet none the less the rival claims of the two Dukes cropped up now and then in their talk. Maybe Lettice would point her finger mockingly at the new coronet on her lover's sleeve, the while regaling him with the ill-natured gossip of the older nobles who, her own Duke especially, disdained the mushroom peer. "Call our lord upstart if you must," Tony would growl in response, "but don't let me catch your brother saying so"; and then they would close the dispute in true loverlike fashion. On one point they found they could agree. Lettice was too true a woman to favour the Lady Mary's match with either Charles or Louis, when so much prettier a man held possession of her heart. "Poor child!" was how Tony's sweetheart would style the future queen of France, though there was but three years' difference in their ages, and Tony made the most of this scant show of sympathy to try and win his lord so charming an adherent. It is possible in time he might have succeeded if he had not begun to take a deeper interest in the royal maiden than Lettice quite approved of.

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It happened in this wise. Lettice and he were philandering as usual under the trees when the King's sister rode up entirely unattended. She must have outpaced her escort, and attracted by the familiar grey livery, drew rein beside the lovers.

"Happy pair!" she exclaimed, with an envious look in her blue eyes; "or rather venturous pair, for you company with an outlaw." Then noting their astonishment, "Coo on in peace, for Mary Tudor will not betray your douce comrade. You dub him 'Love,' but we here spell his name 'Alliance.' Aye, Cupid, thou art only thy true self where they miscall thee not. Go, hide thy winsome face in the fields, for thou art in disgrace in a palace just now."

And then, so Tony told his brothers, the very trees did sigh, and Lettice declared afterwards she felt as though the boy-god fanned her with his wings as he passed, for there was a chill breeze on her cheek and something chillier at her heart. But what Tony felt he hardly knew. It was pain and rapture combined which found relief in speech.

"Lady," he cried, "only command me to bring Love back and I will, though I have to drag him all the way."

But she tossed her head proudly. "That will I never do; Love must come back of his own sweet

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will, or I shall be the first to cry 'haro!' at his forbidden presence here."

"And if he appear self-invited?" whispered Tony, so that not even Lettice close by caught the words.

"Ah, I would clasp him to my heart!" she whispered back, her face aglow with impassioned tenderness: then with sudden petulance, "But you, who are you that draw the heart to one's lips so that I speak words unbecoming a maid? Stand aside, wench—nay, fear not—I am not going to rob you of your lover"; and after Lettice had drawn off in haste, "Did he send you?" she queried curiously; then her mood changing, "If so, tell him Mary Tudor may consent to be married by proxy, but will never stoop to be thus loved. Tell him that the pen is already wetted which is to sign away my hand. Tell him that I shall be lost to him or ever I cross the seas. Tell him that the Duc de Longueville (the prisoner they took last year, but he will know), tell him that he is to play the bridegroom for his master yonder in that very palace where—where—oh, Suffolk knows what has passed between us. Now, sir, you to your love, and I to my—alliance."

But Tony was no longer in a loverlike mood. Lettice intimated as much and dismissed him. Back

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he flew to Southwark, burst in on his brothers, and "Come to my lord," he cried.

To Ralph and Roger it was second nature to obey him, and they followed expectantly. The Duke was in his own chamber not fully dined, but at his fruits, having at his board's end a mess of his gentlemen and chaplains. Observing that the brothers had tidings of import he dismissed the company and gave them audience. Tony did not mince matters, but rendered the lady's message in her own words. After hearing it to the end, not without change of colour, his Grace fetched a sigh and then another, finally, "What would she?" he cried, with the testiness of one whose desire and judgment are at loggerheads, "the issue lies in her own hands. Unless she bid me come in so many words I will not—I must not—stir in the matter."

"Under favour, my lord," objected Tony, "the lady has given you enough encouragement already. Lasses where I come from would bite their tongues in twain ere they said as much."

"But that Greenwich lass inherits the Tudor stubbornness, and has but to say 'No' to this Louis, for the King and all his Council to say so likewise, though it came through their clenched teeth."

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"But you love the poor lady?" asked Tony anxiously.

"Softly, man, softly! you know not who may hear. I durst not ask my heart that question. Come, kinsmen, let us be plain with one another. You are village bred and I a courtier. For you it is permissible to range the whole countryside in search of a wife; for me, choice is restricted to the King's will. If I rebel I do but lose head as well as heart. Now leave me."

"Brothers," growled Tony, as soon as they were alone, "I have done with Charles Brandon for the present, now for the Lady Mary."

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CHAPTER II

THE POWER OF A MAID'S RAILLERY

To do him justice Tony did not for a moment suspect to what an extreme his pity for the Lady Mary was destined to carry him. High principled himself, he detested meanness in others. The bare idea that his lord had been trifling with Mary's affections had been a trial to his fidelity. If then he could have foreseen that he was about to do the same with the affections of Lettice he would have shunned the King's sister like the pest.

It is the way of all strong characters to take up a cause thoroughly. Tony was no exception to the rule. He not only expected his friends to do the same; he, for the time being, ceased to regard them as friends if they refused. His brothers readily lent themselves to his aims. They had nothing better to do, were fond of adventure, wanted to distinguish themselves, and had acquired the habit of following his lead. His sweetheart

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lacked these incentives, and so she disappointed him. Tony's next visit to Greenwich had been, not to court her but, to use her as an intermediary in his future dealings with the persecuted princess. He returned crestfallen. Lettice had received him with black looks. He had been given to understand that if he was there on behalf of another woman's love affairs he was no longer welcome. The Lady Mary, it seemed, had forfeited all claims to Lettice's sympathy, and the expression "That poor child" had given place to "That vain goose."

Failing Lettice, there was Lettice's brother, Tony's superior both in wits and years. It was not to be expected that he would favour Suffolk's pretensions, for, like all the Howard party, he was prejudiced against him. Still, he shared Tony's repugnance (as what Englishman did not) to the French match.

This time smooth-tongued Roger was Tony's delegate. Great things were looked for from his visit, so that when he rejoined his brothers later in the day, with failure writ large on his face, Tony displayed still greater disappointment. Roger had not been to blame. If his arguments had not won over an antagonist, they had disarmed him of his hostility. He had found his cousin difficult to approach. Wilfred at once charged him with having

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come in his lord's interests. Roger swore that the Lady Mary's well-being was uppermost in his thoughts, and that were he to be certified that it was not bound up with Charles Brandon's, then Charles Brandon might go hang for all he cared.

"And how, pray, can three rustics like you hope to further the well-being of a king's sister?" asked courtier Wilfred disdainfully. "Are there behind your backs enough bows and bills to overrun the French suitor's dominions? Or perhaps the contents of your treasure chest are sufficient to recompense Henry for the renouncement of this alliance?—on which perhaps you may not know peace or war depends. Pshaw! go back to sheepcrook and shearhook, and leave the State to be farmed by its statesmen."

Roger did not fly out at this insulting speech. "Bear with me, cousin Wilfred," was the mild response, "while I limn you a picture from my despised home pursuits;" and he went on to show how even his Lincolnshire ewes would risk life to save their young from the wolves. No need to push the parable home by explaining how wolf Louis was waiting open-jawed for England's cade lamb, the Lady Mary. Roger could see by the other's face he had caught his meaning. So then he asked him if it were English statecraft to dung

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the realm with its women's happiness, and if, when he helped to chase the French out of Guinnegate, he expected but a twelvemonth later to be bargaining for their friendship with the heart of his most illustrious countrywoman? This harangue brought out all that was best in Wilfred Brandon. He had not expected such eloquence in a country-bred youth. When he had got over his surprise, he gripped hold of the lad's hand and shook it warmly. It was patent that the iron was hot; Roger hoped to weld it. "Good!" he cried, "Your will is with us, cousin Wilf, now for deeds."

"Slowly, slowly, Roger, I beg," urged his elder, "one reckless act and we shall all be before the Star Chamber. I have no wish to see my ears nailed up at Cornhill. I must consult wiser heads than yours and mine before I dig thumb into the King's pasty. Meet me here a sevennight hence, and I may have something to propose." And thus the pair parted.

Tony listened to all this with ill-concealed dissatisfaction, and then, "You must not keep the appointment, Roger," he cried, "the fellow means to carry this puzzlement to Norfolk; who, for fear of advancing our lord's suit, will argue every honourable feeling out of his follower's breast.

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I'm mighty tired of all this coaxing, now for force."

Then ensued one of the maddest actions of the brothers' lives. Not that they thought it so, or they would never have undertaken a similar one only a few months later.

"Force?" asked Roger, "what sort of force?"

"Why, force that will thwart this devil's plot. We must get the proxy out of the way, kidnap Master Long-somebody or other."

"Won't they soon find another proxy?" objected Roger.

"True! then it must be the bride."

"And if her Highness refuses?"

"Oh," was the airy response, "force is force, and she will have to submit." Tony whistled a different tune a little later, but at present his strong personality carried all before him. Ralph and Roger raised further objections. They had not yet, you see, come under the fascinating influence of the King's sister. Tony therefore wisely brought only selfish incentives to bear upon them. Other youths, he told them, were leaving them in the lurch in the race for renown. Whilst they had been farming their father's demesnes at home, their contemporaries had been winning their spurs before Tournay. Now was their opportunity. If they

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succeeded the country would acclaim the deed, whatever its rulers might do. Did they ask how it could be accomplished? Well, just thus and thus. And so from that day forth the generous-hearted fools set seriously to work to compass the abduction of her Grace from amidst a host of the King's adherents, both knights and men-at-arms. Their only safeguard was the improbability of any one making the attempt. They began by excusing themselves from attendance on their lord for a fortnight. Then one rode east to a certain seaport and secured the services of a friend who owned a ship and did a little coasting trade. Another visited the dense forest of the Weald of Kent and bespoke a temporary hiding-place for the illustrious fugitive. So busy were they that they rose with the sun and made midnight's chimes their curfew. By the time they had finished all their costly preparations most of their patrimony had been frittered away. At last, incredible as it may seem, the day arrived when the trio, together with four fleet pads, were concealed in a thicket of Greenwich Park, not a bowshot from the guards at the gates.

The regard I have for my heroes prompts me to touch lightly on the absurd passage which followed. Their scheme was to wait where they were until they beheld their fair prey ride forth for her

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morning's airing. Then they meant to pounce out upon her, overpower the escort and ride away to their covert in the forest. Once there the sanguine fellows foresaw few further difficulties. Of course, every *posse comitatus* in the realm would be out looking for them. But, disguised in lowly garb, they expected to gain the coast, embark on board their friend's ship, sail for Scotland, place Mary in her sister's, Queen Margaret's, charge, and ask as a reward for their services a knightly part in the civil war then raging.

Now for what actually came to pass. Mary that morning chanced to be out for a walk with only one companion—a middle-aged dame. Suddenly the pair found themselves accosted by the brothers. The fears of the elder lady were soon dispelled by the coolness of the younger. Her Highness was bustled along towards the spot where the horses were tethered, Tony the while confusedly explaining his friendly purpose. But all the heroism of it speedily vanished under the force of Mary's pitiless ridicule.

"Is that all?" she exclaimed with a peal of laughter as soon as she had grasped the situation. "Troth! I thought from your excitement, sirs, that there was a mad bull loose. Mother Guildford, pluck up courage, for there is nothing mad about

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us, not even in these three gentles here, unless they refuse to unhand me. Nay, but I mean it, sirs: this folly must have an instant ending. Oh, how I shall amuse the King when I tell it all!"

"Enough," said Tony, releasing her. "Your Highness doubtless would have us to believe that you have never been in earnest. Well, there's no harm done. All we wanted was to save a lass's heart from breaking. At present it seems whole enough, and as long as it remains so we are content. Come, brothers, doff bonnets to the Lady Mary, for our errand is at an end."

"One moment, sirs," cried Mary, losing all her sportiveness and speaking tremulously. "I said the King my brother will laugh over this passage. I erred, because he will never hear it. There is a side to it which makes it sacred from other ears. I like to think that whatever I may have been, you were in earnest. I am going to a land where earnestness on my behalf will be scarce. Maybe the day will come when if three such Englishmen as you stood offering me the chance you offered just now, I should jump at it; for Heaven only knows how I dread what is before me. No," she added as Tony began one last appeal to her, "nothing you can say will alter my intentions. Probably you have heard of Mettus Curtius.

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Well, my sacrifice is greater than his, because, whereas he died for the Commonweal, I must live for it. God b'ye, leal hearts, which henceforth can do no more for Mary Tudor than pray for her."

She held out her hand, which having saluted, and mother Guildford's as well, they got to horse and so home without hurt or penalty for all the pains wasted over the enterprise.

The sequel however has yet to be told. Three days followed during which life seemed vapid after recent excitement and then their lord called them into his little paradise.

"Kinsmen," said he, "I am not permitted to ask what iniquity you have been about," and he shook his head playfully, "but whatever it may have been we must part. You may be pleased; I am not. I shall miss you sorely, miss your cousinly hearts and honest faces, miss the family interest you take in my poor fortunes. Stop, stop! till you hear me out. I know what you are going to say. But I am not to be persuaded, you must go because one has demanded your services whom I may not refuse. You are to be my wedding gift to her Highness. Untamed though you are I believe you will prove a valuable one. But not in the fashion you have been trying to prove

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your worth to her. She sees that, and wants you out of the realm pending coming events. You are to be placed with a worthy gentle of France for the two or three months before she needs you in Paris. Now, bear in mind, if you are to be of use to her in her new country you must learn its language and customs, bring yourselves to like its people, overcome your insular prejudices against all foreigners. There, lads, I have faithfully delivered her Highness's message, and in conclusion would like to say something on my own behalf. Yet dare I?" He looked earnestly into their faces, then "Henceforth you will be clad in the Tudor colours, but don't forget that under the white and green flows Brandon blood, and that she you serve possesses a Brandon's heart."

So low was the last word pronounced that the brothers only guessed it. Yet not one asked for it to be repeated. Ralph and Roger nodded to their lord, but Tony gathered himself together as if he were preparing already for some stirring work, and thus the audience closed.

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CHAPTER II

THE MISCHIEF OF BABES

AFTER being mewed up for more than three months in a French château, it would be strange if the brothers were quite the same simple fellows we parted with in the last chapter. They had been placed in a good school for learning worldly wisdom. The patron chosen for them had belonged to the bodyguard of Anne de Bretagne up to her decease, since which he had played the grand seigneur in his native province. Here in the wilds he kept up a stately economy in accordance with the best traditions of the court he had recently abandoned. The brothers associated with youths of the noblest blood in France who had come there to qualify for knighthood. Their days were spent in martial exercises, their evenings in the refining society of ladies. But nothing delighted them more, nothing prepared them better for their future career, than when their host sat over his evening cup of Hypo-

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cras chatting of Blois and the Bretons' perch, of hunting expeditions in the forests of Chaumont and St. Germain of love intrigues with *filles d'honneur*, blood feuds with jealous rivals, midnight adventures in the fauxbourgs. No matter how violent the episode, whether a rough and tumble quarrel with cutpurses or a duel *à outrance* with an equal, the *politesse* of France was the conspicuous feature of its description, and the brothers imbibed some of it in this hearsay fashion. Thus to their north country bob and a scrape they had added the salute *à la mode;* to their stock of home-made oaths the more elegant execrations of a French courtier; to their knockdown English fashion of single combat, certain cunning hits of the thrusting sword. Thus also they had learnt to stomach French kickshaws and French badinage without pulling a wry face, and had broken themselves of the habit of blushing when a lady looked their way, and of scowling if a stranger of their own sex did so. In short they now considered themselves well able to hold their own with tongue or hand in Paris street and Paris bower.

The time had come to test their self-confidence. Important events had happened elsewhere during the period of this polishing process, especially to her who expected to profit by it. Mary Tudor had

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been wedded and re-wedded, first some weeks back at Greenwich to the proxy of Louis XII., lastly, but the day previous, at Abbeville to Louis himself. It was to the latter place that the brothers, obedient to their instructions, now repaired in the expectation of accompanying the new bride to the French capital.

To arrive just too late for a great function is a disappointing experience, but they consoled themselves with the thought that they should be in time to take part in the still more magnificent pageant of the coronation. They entered Abbeville when all its princely guests were leaving. The Paris gate was choked with illustrious travellers. Passing through, they began to pick their way up the main street, where knights came dancing along on gallant steeds, fair faces smiled at them out of ornate litters, lackeys in bright-hued liveries jostled them, whilst trumpets blew, baggage wains rumbled, and the paving stones rang with the tramp of a hundred ironshod hoofs.

Presently they passed a house decorated with the royal arms of England, in and out of whose portals flitted grooms in doublets blazoned with the Howard lion. Here, too, signs of a speedy departure were visible. If, thought they, the Embassage is already on the move, so most likely

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would be the Queen's cortége, and they inquired their shortest way to the Hôtel Gruthuse. There, however, they found all quiet and orderly. Guards in the royal colours leaned sleepily on their halberts. The curtains of the upper windows were still drawn. A passer-by told them that the King and Queen were reposing after the turmoil of the day before. As for their departure, the date even did not yet seem to have been fixed. Relieved of the necessity of further haste they began to gaze curiously up at the building which had become historical by the event of yesterday. Workpeople were passing in and out with the débris of the splendid revel, and odds and ends of their gossip overheard and pieced together gave the brothers a faded portrait of the dazzling ceremony. Verily whether for love or for war this nation meets ours right gallantly. Only once before, and that the eve of Crécy, it was being said, had the grande salon in there been packed so full with the *puissance* of France.

The obligation of reporting their arrival to their liege lady, still more the desire to see if she looked happy, directed their steps a second time to the main entrance. They demanded an audience of Mary, were asked for the password, could not give it and were denied admittance. As they parleyed

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with the soldiers the sound of English voices in a house opposite fell upon their ears; so, desisting from their purpose, they crossed the street, entered an open doorway and found themselves at last amidst the Queen's English following. Everybody was busy packing, and as they waited for some acquaintance to recognise them they became struck with the discontent which reigned around. Knights and ladies, lackeys and chamberwomen were bewailing some hardship after our English fashion. Mother Guildford, their old acquaintance, could scarce see them through her tears. John Palgrave, the Queen's chaplain, as he folded up his surplice was murmuring the same maledictions that the pages packing the mails below had been swearing aloud. Had not all Abbeville been in a like flurry of departure yet without repining? Had not their countrymen of the Embassage been even jesting over their preparations for the road? Why then all this grumbling here?

The question soon met with an answer. The two English parties were about to set out in opposite directions, that of Mary for England, the other for Paris. Mary's following had received a sudden dismissal from the King, and attributed this disaster, for such it virtually was to many of them, to the hostility of Norfolk and Worcester.

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It was the old feud: the bride's train had been selected by Wolsey and Suffolk, and represented the new aristocracy, whereas the ambassadorial train boasted of belonging to the older descent. Whether Norfolk really had a hand in the King's sudden decision is still a problem of historians. At least it was a success to his policy; and Wolsey, when he came to hear of it, judged it a reverse to his.

The brothers received the momentous news quite calmly. For one thing they believed themselves exempt from the order of banishment; for another they recognised nobody's authority but Mary's. They had been trained, not tamed, in that Breton château. They did not wish to behave unseemly, but they were not going to be baulked of all the fruits of their late schooling. The Queen herself had sent for them, therefore the Queen herself would have to dismiss them. Anne de Bretagne's whilom *sauvegarde* would have found no fault with his pupils over such a principle. The only question was who could help them to obtain speech of their royal lady? Suffolk they were told had remained at home in England: how about their cousins of Kenninghall? Quite possible that they had been allowed to accompany Norfolk on this embassage. Learning that this was so,

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the trio forthwith bent their steps to the opposite camp.

Some instinct warned Tony that it would be better to approach Wilfred first. Lettice had behaved so abominably last time they met, and might have worse to say to him now he had actually joined the service of the Lady Mary. On the other hand, likely as not she had got over her ridiculous jealousy since her rival (rival, forsooth !) had wedded a king. Honest Tony reddened and gave a short laugh at the extravagant notion of her Highness being Lettice's rival in his affections. Nevertheless women were queer souls, and on the whole he decided to deal first with his male cousin.

Cheering news awaited him at the lodging of the English embassy. It was that the brother and sister had passed from Lord Norfolk's service into that of the new Queen. "So," thought Tony, "Mary still hankers after her old love, and therefore the more Brandons she can keep by her the better she is pleased." Feeling, therefore, now sure that she would exempt them from her husband's arbitrary decree, he led the way to the Hôtel Gruthuse whistling a merry lilt.

This time a more modest request was tendered to the janitors posted there. It was that a

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message might be conveyed to a gentle of the Queen's train, named Wilfred Brandon, asking him to come out and speak with them. Word was passed in to that effect, and presently Wilfred strolled out, resplendent in his new dress of the Queen's household. He was friendly enough in his greetings, but mighty discouraging on hearing his cousins' errand at the Palace. The King's orders included his three cousins, he was sure of that as he had seen their names in the list. They wanted confirmation from the Queen's own lips, did they? Impossible; she was keeping her bed after the fatigues of yesterday. Like to have a word with Lettice before they went home? He would go and see, but he doubted if she could spare the time, as she was busy with her needlewoman preparing her new finery.

Inwardly vowing that they would set this interloper down to his proper level if once they gained a footing in Mary's household, the brothers awaited his return with the greatest impatience. At last a stranger came to the door, one of the King's chamberlains most likely, for he was French. Having looked the brothers up and down, and presumably made up his mind that they were respectable, he signed to the guards to let them by, and led them into an ante-room where Lettice soon joined them.

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The few gallants there courteously withdrew out of hearing; indeed, on noticing the loving looks which passed between Tony and Lettice they left the room outright.

But on hearing her lover's errand Lettice's manner changed. They retired into a window recess, where the unfortunate Tony had to listen to some sharp words. The fact was that Lettice had become the prey of two conflicting ideas. She did not want Tony back in England just after, with the utmost difficulty, she had obtained this footing in the land of his adoption. Still less did she want him to come under Mary's influence again, and that was just what Tony's desire for an audience of her Highness might lead to. She did the only thing she could hit upon at the moment, and that was to goad her lover into a piece of impudence which, if it resulted in an audience with Mary, would result also in an angry one. Looking round, and perceiving that the room was clear of interfering officials, she darted to a curtain, drew it aside, thus opening to view the main staircase, and "There," she cried, "lies the road you want; take it if you dare."

Tony was not the man to refuse such a challenge, especially when spoken by lips so dear as a sweetheart's. Pressing a kiss on Lettice's still pointing hand he sprang past her like a warrior scaling an

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enemy's battlements; and, had he known it, the venture was no less dangerous. After him sprang his brothers, reckoning as little as their leader of where they were going. But she they had left behind knew better, and began to wring her hands after the manner of a woman who finds herself undone by her own jealousy.

The way was clear; and, on reaching a landing, the brothers' only difficulty was the choice of a right door, of which there were many. As they stood hesitating a peal of childish laughter arose. They recognised one of the voices as English; afterwards they knew it to be that of little Mistress Anne Boleyne, who had come abroad in the Queen's suite. Any ally at Court, even a baby, was a godsend at this pass, and Tony at once opened the door whence the sounds proceeded.

"Oh," screamed a tiny creature in French, clapping her hands in baby glee, "here are Roland of Rançevaux and the Knight of the Lion, but who can this be?" turning to Roger. "Oh, I know, you are the wicked dwarf who runs away with poor little children."

"What nonsense!" cried a voice out of the gloom of a long ill-lighted passage, "these are three English kings come to wed with us," and Mistress Anne pushed to the fore.

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"No, they are not," screamed the other, "I won't play that game, Anne. They are chargers and we are knights. You are chargers, *n'est ce pas, Messires?* and you are going to give us a ride on your backs?"

"But who are you really, little lady?" asked Tony in his best French, as he went down on all fours to be mounted.

"*Taises toi,*" she said sharply; then bending down from her seat on his back, "but if you are very good and carry me right to the other end of the passage I don't mind whispering into your ear who I am. You must not let the fairies think you understand, because horses don't do that even in their land. Well, I am the Queen of all Christendom, and that lady riding behind is my tirewoman."

This, however, did not suit Ralph's rider. She bade him sharply to gallop ahead of the Queen of Christendom, and then she would proclaim her more illustrious title. The brothers played awhile with these pretty dears, and then, learning that the little stranger was no less than Madame Renée, the King's youngest daughter, Tony demanded as reward for his exertions the whereabouts of her new stepmother.

"Come," quoth she, "and I will show you," whereon, half in dread lest she should be in earnest,

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and half in hopes of her being so, they allowed themselves to be led into a species of trap. Madame Renée got them as far as a door, and having softly opened it signed to them to precede her, watched them over its threshold, and then scampered off in company with her fellow mischief-maker. The brothers came to an abrupt halt, and began to consider the situation. Persons speaking in subdued tones caught their ears from the other side of a great screen. They were uncertain if they were going to intrude into a reception-room or bedchamber, and dared not peep to see. They were minded to beat a retreat; but before they could do so the door at the other end of the passage was opened softly, and a lady stood glaring at them with rage and horror struggling for the mastery on her face. She was in the act of beckoning them away when sounds of talking on the stairs made her start. She listened anxiously a moment, and then gesticulated vehemently to them to remain in ambush where they were. During this dumb show the brothers' ears had caught everything that was being said in the room. The voices were those of her Highness Mary; and, to judge from its tones, someone aged and ailing. No need to peep now, for they were certain that they were in the presence of the King.

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"Ah, Mary," he repined, "this is all wrong. A brave bridegroom I make lying suffering here! Croyez-moi, I did not bring thee all this way to watch at a sick bed. What must thou think of thy French gallant?"

"Only, Sire, that he needs me. Come, say some other pretty thing. I liked that last so much—you know, about my healing touch."

"Aye, that soothes the aching head if it does not reach the longing heart. Mary, I was not always so. Ask the enemies of France if I was. I have been a doughty knight in my time."

"Oh, tell me, Sire, of your many onfalls. I come of a race whose women love the clash of arms, though they hear but the echo in a warrior's tale."

"Now, b'yr Lady," muttered Tony, "I will play the eavesdropper no longer, be the consequences what they may. Nay, Madame, shake not the fist at me: I mean it," and Tony passed boldly into the King's bed-chamber.

Ralph and Roger were just in time to see what followed. Louis, looking like an old war-horse, had raised himself into a sitting posture at the sudden intrusion, and was searching for the means of protecting his bride. Mary, fully dressed, stood at the bedside with the flush of passion on her beautiful face. At her feet knelt Tony, and a

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moment later the other two. But there was no time for an explanation. An uproar in the passage showed that the woman had raised the alarm, and now there leapt from behind the screen a gallant, sword in hand, whilst others began to collect outside. Taking their bearing from Tony none of the trio altered their suppliant attitude, not even when the leader of this rescue party pricked the hindmost with his point.

"Take them away, Francis," cried the King angrily.

"And have them instantly stripped of my livery," added Mary, quite as sternly.

"And what then, Madame?" asked Tony, fixing her with an eye in which was neither shame nor blenching.

"Oh," remarked he whom the King had addressed as Francis, "you need not trouble her Grace about that, I will see to it;" and after one more bootless look at Mary, Tony rose, his brothers likewise, and passed dejectedly out of the room, the royal guards hovering at their skirts.

"Brothers," said Tony, as they passed to the stairs, "I am not sorry we went there."

"And why, may I ask?" remarked the young noble in whose charge they were, and who, it seemed, could understand their tongue.

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"Oh, my lord, the reason is of no interest to anyone not of our name."

"Nevertheless I should like to know."

"Only that our Lady is contented at last."

"Had you doubts of that before?"

"Aye, grave doubts. She would never have been able to play the wife in there, but she will make a tender nurse."

"Ah," remarked the strange gallant, "I never thought of that!"

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CHAPTER IV

FRANCIS D'ANGOULÊME

THE individual to whom the King had committed the brothers was a handsome youth about twenty years of age, with a long nose, cynical mouth, and wide-awake little eyes. His doublet, vest and trunk hose were cut in the latest fashion out of silks and cloths of the finest texture. The brim of his hat was looped up with a gold brooch of the device of a salamander, over which fell a plume of ostrich feathers. Round his neck hung the order of St. Michael.

He took his prisoners down to the guard-room, had their hands lashed together behind their backs, then dismissed the soldiers except one, whom he posted as a sentinel outside, and having thus, as he hoped, got rid of all curious ears, reverted to the conversation on the stairs.

"No, I never thought of that. How came you to think of it, Messire? But first, to whom am I

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speaking? A Brandon! And you two others? Brandons also! Brothers, I suppose? H'm!" and he stroked his long nose thoughtfully. The challenge of the sentinel and the murmur of voices in the passage for a moment distracted his attention; then:

"Who set you on?" he asked.

"Who set us on?" echoed Tony bewilderedly.

"Aye! Men who throw their lives away for a woman are generally instigated by either love or cupidity. It's not likely to be love in your case, so, once more, who set you on?"

"We have yet to learn we have thrown our lives away," demurred Roger.

"Oh! that is easily shown. Death is the penalty for such an outrage as you have just perpetrated. We call it here in France *lèse-majesté*."

Again a sound without, so faint that it might have been the soldier suppressing a sneeze, or—was it possible?—the rustle of a woman's dress. The Frenchman's little eyes twinkled: he sprang to the door, opened it and passed out, was back again shortly, and henceforth all was quiet in the passage.

"And so," asked Tony, "*lèse-majesté* signifies to take orders only from one's liege lady?"

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"By violating the sancitity of her bridal chamber," added his interrogator.

"Our only resource," urged Roger.

"A suicidal one, Messire, unless you and I can come to terms. My friends, such devotion as yours for Marie D'Angleterre needs explanation. Only a satisfactory one will now procure your pardon."

They could not see the man's drift; did not even know who he was. His off-hand bearing began to nettle Tony. He might have suffered it in a senior, but this gallant could not have been long out of his "teens." So he answered that he was not accustomed to explain his behaviour to any chance stranger who had the impertinence to be curious about it.

"You don't or won't understand," was the irritated response. Then drawing himself up, "I am Francis, Comte D'Angoulême, Duc de Valois and Bretagne, first Prince of the Blood, and in this instance the King's vicegerent of justice. It remains to be seen whether I have you broken on the wheel for your late conduct, or twist an excuse out of it for the bettering of your fortunes. Now to the point." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "The gossip here is that the chief of your name, his Grace of Suffolk, cares more for the new Queen that he ought to do. A post has just brought in

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word that he is shortly to be expected here. He will require careful watching. I suggest——"

"Stop, my lord," cried Tony, "for it is you now who won't or don't understand. We were once Lord Suffolk's gentlemen."

"And still are gentlemen," added Roger.

"Pooh!" said Francis, "desperate men must not be too nice. I am not demanding any treachery of you. Lord Suffolk and the Queen freed you of all allegiance to them when they dismissed you from their service. I offer you a still more honourable post—that of servants to Louis of France."

"So that we may play the spy on those whose bread we have eaten," cried the indignant Tony.

"Espionage becomes an honourable calling when its object is to protect the holy state of wedlock. Thank the gods that your relations with Mary and Suffolk pre-eminently qualify you for the office. Above all else reflect on the consequences of declining it. Your countrymen in this town are in a state of revolt, as witness their angry cries in the street this very instant. If, therefore, I were to make an example of you, the King, so far from accusing me of undue severity, would applaud my act as a much needed lesson. And, *foi de gêntilhomme!* I will do so if you do not at once accede to my terms."

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"Only a coward would insult three helpless men," growled Tony.

Francis flushed scarlet. "Then choose death, and that the most ignominious I can devise," and he turned to the door.

The brothers' faces disclosed their feelings. Tony's bore a look of grim contentment; Ralph's was complaisant; Roger's only showed signs of dissatisfaction. So far he had left most of the conversation to his eldest brother, and was now regretting the fact. For Tony had not only been unconciliatory, but at times insulting, with the result that this man had been goaded into extreme measures against them. If he were to leave in his present mood their lives would pay the forfeit. Now or never was the chance of softening him, and, "My lord," cried Roger, "may I speak?"

"Yes, surely," said Francis, facing about with encouraging promptitude. "My offer is still to the fore, and I know of no man's future more promising than yours, little sir, if you can see your way to accept it."

"Alack! my lord, I cannot do that. I only want to mention some extenuating circumstances in the offence for which you have condemned us to death. My lord, I cannot but think you would have committed it had you been in the same fix."

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"You will be a parlous clever advocate if you get me to believe that. I cannot picture myself bursting in on a royal marriage bed."

"Not even if you were positive her Highness had been no party to your dismissal, and secretly needed your attendance on her more than ever?"

"That you should have imagined so is proof to my mind how relieved she will be to be rid of such overweening followers," was the discouraging rejoinder.

"Ask her, my lord," put in Tony eagerly.

"Ask her! When her last words to me were 'strip them of my livery.'"

"Ay, ask her," pleaded Tony more earnestly than before. "I stake our lives on the answer, caring little for my part if I die should she say 'No.'"

"Ventre gris! I begin to think this fool is as much in love with her as his illustrious namesake," scoffed the Dauphin.

"Oh, come, my lord!" cried Roger, on seeing that his brother had waxed suddenly dumb, "he is betrothed to one of her ladies."

"Soh!" said Francis interestedly. "And the happy person's name?"

"Mistress Lettice Brandon," replied Roger.

"What? another of the family! Verily Brandons swarm about the King's new bride."

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As he stood silently scanning the sullen Tony, Roger seized the opportunity to renew his interrupted argument. He protested that the presence of himself and brothers had nothing to do with Suffolk, asserted the belief that the Queen's best interests were now wrapt up in those of the King, and represented their unfortunate intrusion on his privacy as more the result of inadvertence than of *malice prepense.*

Francis politely waited for him to finish; but left a doubt whether he had been attending. For he appeared to awake out of a brown study, and what he said was more a response to Tony's appeal than to that of the younger brother. "Bide ye here," said he, "whilst I go and learn the Queen's pleasure."

Poor wretches! they were quite satisfied. Mary had had time to get over her annoyance, and would never consent to their execution. Their lives were as good as redeemed. So much the greater the shock when an officer, accompanied by a posse of soldiers, brought them word that the Dauphin's mission had proved bootless, and that they would do well to prepare for the worst, then led them down to a dungeon and locked them in. They had been too dumbfounded to ask when the sentence was to be put in force; but, judging from the fact that nobody had taken the trouble to cast them

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loose from their bonds, believed their time short indeed, and the first thing they did, on recovering from the shock, was to fall on their knees and make their peace with Heaven.

Here we must leave them to follow the actions of Francis D'Angoulême. As he closed the door on his victims an amused smile came over his face. At the rattle of the sentry's halbert as he carried it to the salute the smile vanished.

"Now, mon brave," said Francis severely, "be good enough to explain how you came to let that lady listen at the door? Bribed, I suppose?"

"Monseigneur!" said the man indignantly.

"Her beauty, maybe?"

"Partly, Monseigneur."

"And trouble?"

"Monseigneur, it went to my heart."

"What business has a sentry with a heart!" and Francis eyed the culprit narrowly. He seemed an affected youth with a weakness for dress. "Your name?" asked the Dauphin after a pause.

"Gervoise De Palaine." It was well known in France, for, like all the palace guards, the fellow was of gentle blood.

"Then, Gervoise De Palaine, go and report yourself under arrest" and the speaker passed on to his own suite of apartments in the hôtel.

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Servants were busy dismantling the rooms preparatory to packing up. He turned them all out, flung himself down on a settle, and began to think. "I mistook my men just now," he murmured, "they are too simple-minded for my purposes. The girl sounds more promising. Mistress Lettice Brandon, I am afraid I must pay you out for eavesdropping. Pshaw! what a lot of trouble to take over this new plaything of mine! Somehow these English blondes, with their snowy skins and azure eyes, work havoc in the heart of a Frenchman, even in an old heart like Louis'. Bah! the eldest of those brothers was right; she is only his nurse, and will look elsewhere for a lover. My lord Suffolk, I will brook no rival in you." Here a knock at the door interrupted his train of thought.

"Ah, Gaston," said he to the servant who responded to his invitation to enter, "What is it?"

"One of the Queen's gentlewomen brought this note for you, and the Lady Claude has just sent word she is ready for the road."

"Bid Madame set out, and explain that I am unavoidably detained, but will catch her up before she reaches Beauvais." He glanced his eye over the Queen's message, and read as follows: "Illustrious son-in-law, dismiss my three Brandons with nothing more serious than a chiding, and thus allow

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Mary to exercise her first and sweetest prerogative as Queen of France."

He took up a pen, then, "Are the King and Queen still reposing?" he asked.

"I believe so, Monseigneur."

He threw down the pen. "Go and tell the officer of the day to remove his prisoners to the dungeons. He may tell them that the Queen will have nothing to say to their request. And, Gaston, bid him to be sure and take plenty of men for the office. Englishmen are desperate fellows when hard driven," then, as the servant hesitated to execute the order, "Well, what is it?"

"Pardon, Monseigneur; I should have perhaps mentioned this first of all. The young lady who brought the Queen's note waits in one of the anterooms."

"Show her in at once;" then to himself, "And now for this listener at closed doors." He tossed the Queen's letter into the brazier, and it had hardly become ashes when the subject of his last charitable remark entered the room.

The Dauphin sprang to his feet, swept her a profound bow, and placed his easiest chair for her, then with much apparent concern, "Ah! demoiselle, those blurred eyes!" he exclaimed.

Poor Lettice broke down at this display of

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sympathy. "Oh, my lord!" she sobbed, "spare those unfortunate gentlemen."

"*Hélas, hélas!*" groaned the hypocrite, "would that I could reconcile the King's justice to such a step. I am still desolated at having had to refuse the Queen herself the like request. But you take a great interest in these fellows?"

"They are my cousins, your Grace."

"That explains a good deal, but hardly, mademoiselle, your attitude outside the guard-room a little while ago."

"Alack! then Monseigneur recognised me?"

"Impossible not to, mademoiselle! Such beauty, you know! But compliments will not salve your poor racked heart. And so you love one of these brothers very dearly?"

"I have not said so, my lord."

"No, but the lucky rascal did."

"Then you are aware that my life is wrapped up in his. My lord, you will not surely destroy us both?"

"The gentle pleaded for his life on other grounds. Mademoiselle will perhaps pardon my saying that she ought to be sure of his affections before surrendering entire control over hers."

"Nay, my lord, I have only my own heart to

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rely on. But what causes you to doubt my Tony's?"

"I should only pain you worse than ever were I to explain."

"Yet, your Grace, pain is sometimes wholesome to us poor women."

"Then, if I must speak, your lover professed his life of no worth unless the queen restored it to him."

"He is infatuated with her, your Grace," sobbed the wretched Lettice.

"So it seems. Why not let him perish deeming her false?"

"That is not woman's way, my lord. She sacrifices all in the lost cause."

"All?"

"Except her beloved."

"Whereas my meaner sex would limit the sacrifice to the rival, mademoiselle."

The jealousy in poor Lettice, always on the alert, took flame at this insidious suggestion. Francis detected it in her eyes, and registered a resolve that he would so play on this weakness of a warm disposition that all her lover's confidences should become his, and amongst them, such was his expectation, some of his master's Suffolk. For the present, however, his aim was to awake in the girl a sense of lasting gratitude to him.

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"Fair lady," he exclaimed, "your sentiments have kindled all my chivalry. Where the Queen failed you have succeeded." He scribbled a few lines on a piece of paper, and put it into her hands. "I cede this to your wet eyes. Maybe it will obviate the sacrifice of either self or rival in your lover's cause."

"Oh! my lord," cried the now palpitating Lettice, "what does it mean?"

"Only that as soon as you present that slip of paper to the officer of the dungeons, your cousins will be free men. Nay, no thanks, I pray, but these two conditions. Delay the delivery of the pardon one hour, and give them to understand that it is subject to their immediately quitting France."

"Your Grace is the noblest of men!" cried Lettice and she knelt to kiss his hand before leaving the room.

The noblest of men! Scarcely that, Francis D'Angoulême! Yet by no means the basest. Libertine that you are, you have many good qualities. You may think little of laying siege to a man's honour or a woman's purity; but so far from bearing malice against him or her who has been proof against your disgraceful overtures, you respect and even reward them if you get the chance. There lies the clue to much in your behaviour to

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these brothers which otherwise would remain an enigma.

Now to show the man in one of his worst moods. Directly Lettice had gone, he began to sum up the results of his recent strategy. "Let me see," soliloquised he, "those rascals will have had a good frightening, and richly they deserved it! How they will have been cursing poor little Mary! 'Her three Brandons' as she called them. Now to forecast what follows their release from hold. They will set out for Calais, and fall in with Suffolk on the road. Sure to do that, because they will be on the look out for him. Well, so much the better for me; he will hear what I think of him and his visit to France. And let me impress on you, my lord, that this is the first and last warning you will get from me. So steel your heart when nigh Marie D'Angleterre. I don't suppose you mean to, and so you will fall foul of Francis D'Angoulême. Aye, come to Paris with all your Brandons, good, my lord, and I undertake to outwit the lot of you. Those brothers would have been clumsy tools; they will make admirable dupes. Tony, my fine fellow, you may not believe yourself in love with Marie, but you are, and your sweetheart knows as such; if I think fit your lord shall too. Oh! there is a winning game in all this if I

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but play it properly," and Francis began to make ready to follow his wife to Paris. Then he suddenly remembered something that he had yet to do. He rang the bell and ordered the disgraced sentinel to be shown up.

The wretched youth came in trembling. He was expecting a stern sentence, but experienced quite the reverse treatment. It was the Dauphin's habit to make serviceable allies of those who had laid themselves open to his vengeance by requiting their misdeeds with favours. He first terrified the fellow with threats, then proceeded to show him how his offence might be condoned, finally held out hopes of procuring his promotion. Before Monsieur de Palaine left that room he had sworn to become the Dauphin's spy.

At last Francis felt free to take the road.

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CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERIOUS CHAMPION

THE Seine splits up Paris into three towns—on its right bank the Ville, on its left the Université, on the island in midstream the Cité. In the first are the palaces, in the second the colleges, in the third the churches. The Ville for feasting, the Cité for prayer, the Université for learning. At the present moment we are concerned with neither the priests nor the scholars of Paris but with her nobility; it is, therefore, in the Ville we must look for what we want.

In that quarter of it east of the Rue St. Martin is a cluster of great houses, of which for vastness of architecture the Hôtel St. Pol excels, for variety the Logis d'Angoulême, for beauty the Hôtel des Tournelles. In these, at the re-opening of this story, its principal personages were distributed—to wit, the King's following at the Tournelles, the Dauphin's at the Angoulême, and the English at the St. Pol.

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Francis had accurately presaged the course of events. Suffolk was in Paris with the brothers in attendance on him. He had come, ostensibly, to take part in the Coronation Tourney; secretly, to renew his tender relations with Mary. The Royal travelling party had been moving leisurely on the capital, and Suffolk had overtaken it at Beauvais. Mary and he had met in the King's sick room, whither he had been summoned to an audience. He had come away of the same opinion as Tony. Mary's husband was not her lover. The gossip of the suite assigned Francis d'Angoulême to the vacant post, and from all accounts he had filled it ever since his appointment by Louis as *chevalier d'honneur* of the bride. Suffolk listened to the idle tongues with all the contempt of a preferred rival. He was curious to see this youth with the fox's face and lion's heart, as the brothers had described him. He would ask to break a lance with him at the jousts—only one, and Mary's self-chosen knight would be biting the dust under her beautiful eyes.

That particular triumph had been denied Suffolk, yet it was impossible for him to complain of his luck at the tournament. At an early stage Francis had been put *hors de combat* by a trifling injury to the hand, after which his tame lot had been to

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watch the picked spearmen of his race go down day after day in unbroken succession before the unerring point of his detested rival. Never before had Suffolk borne himself so gallantly in the presence of the secret queen of his heart. The ailing Louis had looked on enviously from his litter, whilst Francis had worked himself into a fever of jealousy over the spectacle. Was there no Frenchman capable of retrieving the fame of the national knighthood? That was what he kept asking, and then a rumour reached the English quarters that he had found his man.

Such then was the state of affairs in the corner of the royal demesnes adjoining the Rue St. Antoine where the five shields of the prince-challengers had been set up. Elsewhere Suffolk's fortunes were not so prosperous. Francis had contrived to surround the young queen with his creatures. To his chagrin Suffolk found he was not permitted to see her alone. If he had known it he might have solaced himself with the thought that neither was his rival. The heir-apparent had alarmed his ambitious mother by the marked attentions he kept paying the bride. Louise de Savoie knew her son well enough to be sure that he would stop at nothing in the indulgence of his passions, and so took steps to prevent him thus ruining his

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brilliant prospects, with the result that her agents rubbed shoulders with his in Mary's private apartments. To add to the entanglement Norfolk's spies were watching Suffolk quite as closely as those of Francis. Wheels within wheels, plot and counter plot, and a poor little bride of sixteen at the bottom of it all. This was what was agitating Parisian society towards the close of the year 1514, and in the midst of the devil's cauldron the three brothers found themselves.

They, poor lads, were everybody's game. At the sight of their simple faces and grey liveries, it was a case of "walk into my parlour, master fly." There was not a guardroom or salon of the palaces in which they would not have been welcome. Suffolk carefully expounded the situation to them. It was no use telling such hardy knaves that they were in peril, that their very presence in Paris was a breach of the conditions pertaining to their pardon, and that the moment they were out of his sight they ran the risk of being put under arrest. He had based his cautions on the danger *he* would incur from any indiscretion of theirs. No need to exaggerate! To commit himself in any way with Mary would be to invoke upon his devoted head the vengeance of the two most redoubtable potentates in Christendom.

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But say what he might he could not depress the high spirits of the brothers. The sense of danger —danger which their lord shared with them—gave a fillip to existence. So far from considering him a protection to them they believed themselves essential to his safety, boasted of having become his eyes and ears, whereas the utmost at present he expected of them was to keep the other organ, their mouths, shut. Tony especially enjoyed his altered circumstances. He was full of magnanimous schemes, longing to heap coals of fire on Mary's head for her neglect of him, longing to prove that the life she had not thought worth saving was one of the most valuable of her possessions. Moreover he thought he saw his way to effect his purpose without disloyalty to his sweetheart. He meant to marry Lettice some day. But she would have to lend his devotion for a time to the Queen, a devotion that never had been personal, and was now more disinterested than ever. For, self would not be gratified but sacrificed if he succeeded in helping to bring to pass the longing that he believed haunted both Suffolk and the Queen. It was their union—future, not present. Tony would be no party to any illicit love-making. But they were saying at the taverns that Louis could not last much longer. Indeed,

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Tony had given a clerk of the Basoche a belting only an evening or so back for likening Mary to a pacing mare sent over by the King of England to carry his brother of France splendidly and gently into Paradise.

Something now occurred to confirm Tony in all this self-deceit, something which brought him and Lettice closer together than even her saving his life had done, something which promoted better relations between the Suffolk and Norfolk Brandons than had yet existed—namely, a common cause.

It was an off day at the jousts, and Suffolk had taken the opportunity to attend one of those unsatisfactory audiences of the Queen which left both their hearts as unburdened of their secrets as if they had not met. He had brought the brothers with him, not because he wanted them at the Tournelles, but because he believed them even more likely to get into trouble boxed up for some hours in his rooms at the St. Pol. Tony on these occasions would be in Lettice's company and thus safe from mischief-makers. The other two had also hit upon a harmless resort when on a visit to the King's palace. At least so the royal nursery would appear to be, for surely spies and conspirators could not exist in the same atmosphere as two harmless babes? Yet the readiness of

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Madame d'Aumont, the governess, to receive them there, especially as she was the same lady who had caught them outside the King's bed-chamber at the Hôtel Gruthuse, might have aroused the suspicions of less unsophisticated youths. Be this as it may they had found her apparently ready to forgive and forget, withal chatty and entertaining.

On the occasion in question Ralph was amusing himself as well as the little girls by nonsensical talk, whilst Roger gossiped close by with Madame, though not interestingly enough, as it turned out, for either to be deaf to the chatter of the little ones. Such then was the peaceful situation which was the prelude to an exciting passage in the brothers' lives.

"Well," Ralph was saying to his favourite Anne, "what are we to-day?"

"Oh, I'm nothing," replied his small country-woman, "but that fond Renée thinks she's a star, and that all the gems at the coronation twinkled because of her," and mistress Anne cast a scornful look at her friend, who was busy at Ralph's feet clothing a doll for its first visit to the tournament.

The conversation drifted off to the peculiar length of noses, the problem being raised as to whether that of the King's jester or the Dauphin's

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was longest. Roger's interest slackened; besides, Madame had begun to interrogate him about his lord, a topic that required his whole mind, and when he was at liberty to listen to the others, their conversation had become more amusing.

"Do you know, master Ralph," Anne was saying, "I am afraid I cannot marry you after all."

"Alack, alack, you false wench! But who is my fortunate rival?"

"The Robber of the Rhine. He is twice as big as you, and has long gold spurs!"

"And where did you meet him."

"Oh, I haven't met him yet! The armourer at the Logis d'Angoulême is a friend of mine, and told me all about him. He says that he was brought all the way in a cage, and that he eats a wolf every night for supper. Master Ralph, what do you eat for supper?"

"Whatever I can get. I should not like to have the feeding of your new lover. Who does that?"

"Monsieur d'Angoulême. He's his new pet and——"

"Silence, child, this instant! I will listen no longer to such rubbish," broke in the royal governess sharply, indeed more sharply than Roger thought the occasion warranted. Not that he was surprised at her vehemence, for he had watched

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her face grow clouded, startled, horrified, insomuch that he was now asking himself 'Why all this emotion if the child were really talking nonsense?' Then it suddenly dawned upon him that here was the same rumour, only clothed in verbiage to suit a child's fancy, which had found its way into the English quarters. As in Anne's case, so in his, the chief attractions in this Robber of the Rhine were his stature and gold spurs. A knight the size of his brother Ralph at this juncture would be worth his weight in ducats to Francis d'Angoulême at the lists, and maybe some such princely sum had been paid to secure his services. Roger's thoughts turned from the supposed new champion to the man who would have to combat him. Only that morning the brothers had remarked on the worn-out appearance of their lord. The prodigious exertions of the week had begun to tell upon his health, and he was barely half the gallant who had couched his first spear at the tourney. Yes, a fresh antagonist now of such formidable parts might mean the loss of the prize which every Englishman in Paris had set his heart on escorting to the King at Greenwich.

The worst of these brothers was their tell-tale faces, and Madame was no mean physiognomist. Whatever she read in Roger's did not outwardly

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perturb her. It had the contrary effect; she recovered her composure and with it the thread of some anecdote her scolding had interrupted, so that when Ralph and Roger presently took their leave it was without a suspicion of the trouble she was about to cause them.

Roger kept his own counsels until he reached Lettice's room. Then "Tony," he burst out, "there is mischief brewing! Lettice, you had better listen, for this is a matter which concerns England's honour quite as much as my lord's;" and he told them his fears.

At first there was an outburst of indignation against Francis for the perfidy of springing this new champion upon them at this late stage of the contests. Then came the resolve to thwart him. At Lettice's suggestion Wilfred was called in. All his patriotism awoke at the idea of so scurvy a trick. He and his sister put their heads together and consulted. The brothers listened delightedly to quick-wittedness and ripe judgment working out a promising plan. It was at once decided that whatever had to be done must be a secret confined to the occupants of that room. Suffolk was the last person to be told, because if it became known that he had been a party to the prevention of his encounter with the German, he would be robbed

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of the fame of being the only unvanquished lance at the jousts.

The idea was to disable the new champion in some way or other; but first to catch their bird. The time was short. It was Sunday, the morrow's contests were reserved for the inferior knights, which gave them till Tuesday, the closing day, to effect their purpose. The brothers foreboded that they might be searching Paris a week hence for the concealed knight and no nearer finding him. Lettice and Wilfred were more sanguine. And now to relate the great Brandon conspiracy.

The only clue to the German's whereabouts was the loquacious armourer. He would have to be visited and cunningly questioned. Lettice undertook the delicate office. She tricked herself up in a French tirewoman's clothes, and saw the fellow that very afternoon. He proved to be an ardent admirer of her sex at all its ages. Anne Boleyne had been to him but a bud of beauty, here was beauty in full bloom. Lettice coquetted with the amorous fellow until she had found out all she wanted. He had, it transpired, been taken to the German's hiding place to repair a piece of his mail. Only a clever woman would have known how to fit such a topic into a love-passage. But Lettice accomplished the feat without difficulty.

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Luckily she had not dallied over it, because half-an-hour after she left the armourer the wretch was lying in a cullote of the Grand Châtelet cudgelling his brains to discover what crime he had been guilty of. Madame d'Aumont could have informed him, but he did not think of applying to her.

Meanwhile Wilfred was dressing up for his part in the conspiracy. Disguised as a scholar he presently set out for a lowly tavern outside Paris, and returned a few hours later fully satisfied with the expedition. He had learned the habits and tastes of Ritter von Teufelsdorf, as the new champion was called, had studied his height and appearance, counted his followers, found out who were his visitors. The rest of the business was comparatively plain sailing to this wily intriguer. Francis had, it appeared, been taking every precaution against being suspected of collusion in it. Not only had his agent been warned to keep out of sight until wanted, but that no further communications must pass between the Logis d'Angoulême and his lodging. When an employer cuts himself off entirely from his tool he must not be surprised to find, when the day arrives to use it, that it has been tampered with. Thus reasoned Wilfred, and went to work on the completion of his arrangements without a qualm of fear as to their ultimate success.

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The three brothers were not so composed. They could scarcely control their excitement in their master's presence. It would have been wiser of Wilfred had he given them something to do, if only to work off the exuberance of their feelings. They had been reduced so long to a colourless existence under their lord's eye that they were like three high-spirited schoolmates on the eve of an escapade. Happily Suffolk had much to engross his attention, or he would have suspected that something was up, and watched the brothers more closely.

We pass now to the scene and time of action.

A bowshot off the Sêvres road and a league short of the Porte St. Germain stands the Auberge des Bucherons, house of call for the charcoal-burners and wood-cutters employed in the adjacent forest. It was a lonely situation for an inn; and such customers, thirsty though the nature of their labours made them, would not have insured a livelihood for its proprietor but for an occasional travelling party, which, too late to enter the capital before gate closing, would be constrained to spend a night there. Usually these belated folk brought their own accommodation, and needed no more than a suite of furnished apartments, which were always in readiness, being styled (doubtless because

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of the princely price paid for their use) "the State chambers." At present they were occupied by the Dauphin's new allies, Ritter von Teufelsdorf and his squires. Consequently when a hawking party of four French gallants put in an appearance about the neighbourhood's bedtime, and announced that they had lost their way and must lie there a night, the host was at his wits' end to know what to do. Never yet had he turned away a paying guest, and nothing short of force would allow him to do so now.

He ran his eye over the leader of the party, noted that he was rich by his apparel, liberal because of his having tossed a crown to the woodman who had guided him, well provided with the necessaries of a night's stay, or why the presence of that sumpter beast. So begging the gracious seigneurs to excuse him for a moment he went off to try and persuade his German customers that it was more for their sakes than his that he was desirous of entertaining some fresh company.

"Now to second good mine host's well-meaning attempt," whispered Wilfred, for, needless to relate, the strayed fowlers were the cousins. "Get ready our credentials, Tony. Quick! unlade the paniers, and Roger, you be pretending to count the wine flagons. Leave the parleying to me, and pray

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the saints that my bad French may escape notice."

The brothers set to work as directed, and by the time their adversary came out to have a look at them the light of his torch fell on a goodly array of flasks, containing liquors as potent as *sola regis*, and as choice as Juraçon. The lanzknecht had to stoop his great mop of red hair to come under the doorway: then arrived the crisis of the plot. His taste for liquor had been one of the pieces of information Wilfred had picked up. Francis, in view of the service for which he had been hired, had wisely been keeping him on short commons. A carouse was a long-denied luxury, and so the lure proved irresistible. On his little pig eyes lighting up with lustful expectation the cousins knew that the first move in the game could be scored a success to their side.

But to gain peaceable admittance into an enemy's stronghold is one thing, to leave it as triumphantly quite another. They soon found that they were no match at trencher and cup with fellows who put by a portion at a mouthful and emptied a measure at a gulp. One circumstance was, however, in their favour. The adversary was now drinking at their expense, and, lest the sources of their hospitality should give out prematurely, they

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were willingly excused from drinking cup and cup with him. If health depended on the number of times the cousins were pledged they might have expected to live well into the ensuing century, and if cordiality had been all they had come for they had never passed a pleasanter evening. As a matter of fact they soon became disgusted with their greedy guests; neither the songs nor jests entertained them, for they were rendered in an unknown tongue, which was, perhaps, well for the cousins' morals but a hindrance to their amusement.

By the time the inn folk had retired to rest the orgie had become hot service. From wine and women the talk had turned to the camp, the duello, the impending jousts. The Ritter had just proclaimed himself the doughtiest lance in the dominions of Maximilian. When a man is in his cups, from boasting to taunting and from taunting to fighting are but two short strides. Unfortunately the usually placid Ralph had fallen into a bad mood for listening to taunts. He had been trying to keep pace with the lanzknecht's drinking achievements. Feeling worsted in that form of contest he was for another, namely measuring strengths with him. At first the two giants had taken to one another; but, from sitting cheek by

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jowl and calling each other twin brother, they had got to arms' lengths and chin cocking, precursors, it was to be feared, to a bout of hand-grips, and at the first blow it would be all over with Wilfred's expectations of making the Robber of the Rhine drunk. Indeed, since his allusions to what was in store for him on the morrow, he had been passing the wine flagon, had now to be coaxed into further excesses, wagers laid — German heads against French—and the prize to the one who retained sufficient sense to grasp it. In short, the second move in the game had to be scored "impasse," the one side remaining as sober as the other.

That Wilfred had become afraid of Ralph spoiling all by losing his temper was apparent from the way he fidgeted in his chair. Tony and Roger watched him narrowly, in the expectation that he would soon give the signal for some more violent method of attaining their ends. They were grievously taken aback by the stratagem he actually had recourse to.

The Ritter now had only eyes for his rival in inches. His underlings had got hold of one of the falcons and were trying to make her swallow some wine. Nobody was looking save Tony and Roger when Wilfred suddenly upset a powder into the flask at the knight's elbow. The act was so unexpected

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that the two brothers remained supine for a while. They had no stomach for that sort of devil's work, yet neither liked to take the initiative in upsetting their cousin's carefully laid plans. Apart from the Ritter's late boast, now they had seen the huge fellow they believed him an overmatch for their worn-out lord, and were consequently more than ever resolved to prevent the meeting. Other considerations, however, began to influence them. They pictured what would follow the draining of that bottle, their uneasy expectancy for the first symptoms of the poison, the realisation, by the abasement of their victims, of the full extent of their own, the spectacle of man after man collapsing under the table amongst all the filthy accumulations of a long drinking bout. In vain they tried to reconcile conscience with the deed by the idea that these swine would be in their proper places at last, that it would be only the hastening of the debauchment which would have been self-inflicted if they could have afforded to wait a little longer.

No, it must not be! and Tony looked at Roger, Roger back at him, then both in the direction of the hocussed bottle. An instant later they were on their feet. Tony seized the noxious mixture, dashed it into the face of the astounded giant and

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lugged out his rapier. Roger, dropping the part of a French hunter, was calling on the nearest foe in vigorous English to stand up and lay on.

"Besotted idiots!" hissed Wilfred, rising also and drawing.

"Better that than a poisoner," retorted Tony, beginning to fence with another of the Germans, then to Ralph, "Have at the Ritter, lad, your chance has come."

It was four to four at first, but a minute later two to one, for Roger had got in under his adversary's guard, and Wilfred's point was deep in the throat of his man. Ralph and the knight were too closely locked together for dagger play. Tony seemed to have met his match and had received a slight wound. Then followed further disaster to the foe. Tony's man dropped dead under a foul stroke of Wilfred's. The Ritter slipped and was borne back on the table, which broke asunder and let both wrestlers down, Ralph topmost.

"Despatch him, you ninny, and let's be going, or we shall come to the garotte," roared Wilfred; then glancing around to see if any of the others required the like office, and hearing a groan from Roger's victim he passed his sword through the wretch's heart, opened the window and leaped out.

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But that was not Ralph's way of fighting. He had gained his advantage by accident and was helping the Ritter up for another bout. A shout from Wilfred followed by the clash of swords, drew Tony and Roger to the window at a run. Even the Ritter ceased cursing to listen ; then, just as Tony had got his head out, the door opened and in walked Francis d'Angoulême.

His first thought was of the Ritter, and he seemed much relieved to find him sound. The fellow began to talk volubly in his guttural lingo, but Francis at once cut him short by telling him to go and wait downstairs. Then as soon as the huge fellow had lurched through the doorway, "Red-handed," jerked out Francis viciously, and pointed to the three bodies on the floor.

"It was a fair fight, we were evenly matched," argued Tony, and turning from the window he came forward to show Francis his gashed thigh.

"Which reminds me that there was a fourth ; who was he ? Oh, of course, you refuse to say. No matter, it is the master who will have to deal with Francis d'Angoulême."

"Your Highness always treats us as if we were babes in leading strings. Lord Suffolk has as much to do with this affair as he had with the Abbeville one."

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The Dauphin arched his eyebrows, Tony thought to imply he was lying, but exaggerated the force of the gesture.

"I profess surprise," said Francis, "will you swear that he knows nothing of this?"

"More," answered Tony proudly, "I repeat it on the word of Tony Brandon."

"It is enough," said Francis; "then my displeasure is limited to you three and one other?"

"Pardon if I contradict you," replied Tony in his suavest manner, sure sign of coming violence, "but you talk as if this room was full of your minions. Brothers, hold the door. Now, your Highness, be good enough to draw, for I cannot murder you."

The sight of Tony's point vibrating an inch off his vitals would have sent many a man, however daring, leaping back to the wainscot. All Francis did was to jerk aside the fold of his cloak so as to show that his sword arm was in a sling, and Tony indicated by a grunt of disappointment that he accepted this obstacle to a fair fight.

"No," said Francis, "I did not come for that."

"Then, my lord," interposed Roger, "what did you come for? and how are we to take a man who has so high a sense of our honour that he stakes life on it, and yet holds his own as cheap as you have done over this mean trick?"

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"And to you, my little friend, I make answer that neither did I come to learn a lesson in chivalry."

"Maybe to impart one?" sneered Tony.

"Not even that! Listen, and you shall hear. Messires Brandon, during the short time you have been in France you have crossed my path twice. Thank your luck and not your intentions that as yet I have suffered nothing worse than inconvenience at your hands. Even inconvenience I am not wont to pass unpunished. Only a somewhat unwilling respect for your few virtues suffers me to spare you this time. But 'fore heaven! thwart me once again and I smash the three of you. Now do you understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord, and thank you for your clemency. But——"

"There must be no buts," broke in Francis vehemently.

"There should be none, my lord," persisted the audacious Tony. "Only in the event of your again interfering with the interests of those we serve shall you be obliged to repent your forbearance to-night."

"'Tis a faithful fellow," said Francis in tones that showed he grudged his admiration. "But how am I to teach you that Paris is not London? You

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had no business to come here. Now that you are here, stay, and face all the perils of the situation. You shall not do so blindfold. Follow me all three of you to the window." He opened the casement and leaned out.

"Take care, my lord," whispered Tony, showing him his bare dagger.

"Oh! I shall take care; the question is will you?" and he whistled, whereon from out dark nooks and shadows started half a score of swordsmen. "Now," continued he, "yonder folk are no hired bravoes, but my kinsmen and acquaintance every one. If there were the least suspicion of my being in peril up here, nay more, if they received the smallest hint that I wanted you out of the way, I should not be able to restrain them. So no menaces; put up that toy and go! Pass fearlessly forth, for you are as safe as in London. But lay this to heart, that there is no sanctuary in the whole of France for you if these people once receive my orders to destroy you. Messires, en garde;" and with an imperious salute he closed the speech.

He had made an impression on the brothers even if he had not overawed them. When they gained the open, every bush and post seemed to their excited fancies an armed man. Some indeed were, mysterious gallants who stood motionless in the

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darkness with their faces shrouded in their mantles, and the sharp blades of their swords projecting in front, so that Tony stumbled up against one and swore, and Roger nearly ran on another and cried out. As for Ralph the wine was yet in his blood, and he performed a feat of strength which gave food for gossip to the charcoal burners for many a year to come. Instead of following his brothers' example and walking peaceably off, he wrenched the wine-stake, a pole as big as a young tree, out of its socket and, using it for a lance, strode straight through the group of gallants into the darkness. It was providential that not a man came in his way or there would have been more trouble that night. When the whole company closed in on the brothers and followed them all the way to Paris, even Ralph breathed more freely on finding himself through the Porte St. Germain without a stab in the back.

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CHAPTER VI

THE QUEEN'S FOOLS

WITH the great joust between Suffolk and the Ritter, which took place on the morrow just as Francis had conspired, this narrative is not concerned. It can be read in history how Suffolk, though pressed at first, would have beaten his giant antagonist to his knees had not the judges let drop the bars prematurely. What does concern us is the ill blood that the Englishmen's triumph engendered, ill-blood culminating in a brawl the evening of the same day, wherein five of the Queen's archers met their death, their officer included.

The morning after these events Suffolk went to the Tournelles to receive his well-merited meed of praise from the lips of her who, more than anyone else, secretly enjoyed it. He came back and called the brothers into his presence to tell them a piece of good news. It appeared that at his

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reception by the King and Queen, the problem of finding some of Mary's countrymen to replenish the gaps in her archer-guard had cropped up. Now Suffolk had inwardly resented the preference so far shown to Norfolk's nominees in appointments of the kind, especially to that of Lettice and Wilfred, relations of his though they were. Conscious, however, that his own Brandons had fallen into dire disgrace at Abbeville, he did not venture to suggest their names for the honour, and was startled to hear the Queen do so.

"By-the-way, my lord, why not my three Brandons?" asked she. "I am aware that they are with you in Paris."

Suffolk looked at the King, and the King answered the unspoken question.

"Those three rogues who forced their way into our bed-chamber? Mary, I am surprised at you—at you too, my lord, for retaining them in your service." Then to Francis's wife and mother who, at this untoward moment, chanced to enter the presence, "Listen, Claude and Louise, here is Mary just asking for those three unruly brothers to be re-installed in her suite as archers of the Guard. What do you think of that?"

Suffolk here confessed to his listeners that he had devoutly wished them at the bottom of the Seine

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at this pass. But to his surprise the new-comers took up their cause warmly.

"The very men for the purpose, Sire—honest, bold and zealous!" cried Louise de Savoie.

"A great deal too bold and zealous," remarked Louis dryly.

"Zeal is the fault of a beginner, and sometimes far too quickly unlearned. But Sire, you called them unruly. Under favour, it was your little daughter's unruliness which led them into that scrape. Ask Renée, the naughty child, about that. As for the young men, they will suit admirably for archers, and I have pleasure in seconding my lord Suffolk's proposal."

"Not mine, Madame," said Suffolk hastily.

"But mine," put in the Queen.

"And mine," echoed the gentle Claude, upon which the King gave in and confirmed the appointment.

"But what does it mean?" cried Tony, with less delight than his lord expected.

"It means," replied Suffolk, "that I shall have at last three leal hearts about the Queen's person. It means that I can go home now with the assurance that my fondest interests at this Court will be watched and fostered. It means that a channel is opened for the communication of my most secret

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thoughts to her who has thus far sighed for them in vain. It means, oh, it means fresh life to your lord, lads."

Tony fidgeted with his belt, looked this way and that, until forcing himself to a disagreeable task he set his eyes straight at those of Suffolk.

"Your Grace's trust in us goes to the heart. It has never been misplaced there. I hope it never will be. But, my lord—Oh, how can I put it?"

"Put it straight," counselled Suffolk grimly.

"Well then, my lord, I say it with all respect. Granted that your trust in us is not misplaced, may not the time for it be?"

"Answer that for yourself," said his lord still more stiffly.

"Oh, your Grace! there was a time when we would have risked our lives to do all you have just asked. It may come again—and I pray that it may. But—but at present—'Vive le Roi!'

"Long live the King!" put in Ralph, catching only part of his brother's meaning.

"No, brother," corrected Tony, "that is going too far. The French leave out the 'long.'"

"And so," said Suffolk bitterly, "I must expect nothing. Nothing! when that rake—you know who—dances attendance on her in season and out. Nothing, quotha!"

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"My lord, you mistake me. It is the first duty of a Guard of the Body to stop that sort of iniquity."

"And anything else of the kind from other people—from me, for example?" said Suffolk fuming. Then, on their making no response, he went on, mastering himself but speaking morosely. "Well, go your ways, and I mine. If only you were not such simpletons," and with this parting shaft he thought to close the interview. Now, he had told them that the Court was leaving for St. Germain-en-Laye that very afternoon, and Tony, fearing that this would be the last chance of a word with him, held back. "What! my lord, have you no instructions for us in case the time should come?" he exclaimed.

"The time for what?" asked Suffolk impatiently.

"The time for wishing 'Vive le Roi' to another King of France."

"Ha!" said their lord, then with fresh intolerance, "but you are such simpletons," and thus they parted.

That was not the only question of Tony's to which had been vouchsafed no answer. "What does it mean?" he had asked. Not what it might mean to his lord, but what it meant to the mother

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of Francis, what it meant or would mean to Francis himself when he heard of this sudden favour being bestowed on the brothers. Two scenes enacted later that day maybe will explain what Tony had wanted to know.

In a small salon of the Logis d'Angoulême sat Madame Louise and her daughter-in-law at their noon meal. Said Francis's mother to Francis's wife, "We did a good stroke of business this morning, chère Claude."

"I saw you thought so," replied Claude, "so put in my word in favour of those brothers. But I am ashamed to confess I failed to see the advantage to us in their appointment."

"Then you shall now. Our beloved but treacherous Francis has, I have reason to believe, been tampering with my emissaries. I might, of course, have replaced them by others, but only to discover, and next time too late perhaps, that they also had deserted to the opposite side. In a fix like this an upright foe is better than a doubtful friend."

"I don't follow," said the slow Claude.

"You have read Euripides? Well, then you know how the actions of the good people in his plays can always be foreseen, those of the bad but seldom. These brothers are the good actors in

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our little drama—transparent as the glass of that cup, shallow as the water in this dish."

"Francis will see through them as quickly as we," objected his wife.

"That is not the point. The point is that they are quite as much opposed to his intrigues in a certain quarter as you or I. Without their being aware of the fact they have become our tools vice those whom the dear Francis has succeeded in turning against us. This time he will not succeed, these brothers are incorruptible."

"But they are Suffolk's tools as well."

"That is the King's business, not ours."

"Francis will find means to put them out of the way."

"Very likely, but until he does we shall have no better friends at Court than these three obstinate honest fools. So pledge me, ma mie, the Queen's fools!" and the two illustrious dames sipped daintily of their sorbet.

Thus Francis's mother; now for Francis himself. In another apartment of the same palace sat his Highness in interesting converse with Wilfred Brandon. Tidings reached that particular quarter of the Logis d'Angoulême with the speed of magic. The consequences of the brothers' promotion had been thought out there before they had become

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imprinted on the dull brain of his consort. Francis had fitted in the intelligence with other recently come to hand, and the result was the subject of conversation between him and Wilfred Brandon. Their cousin's face would have startled the brothers could they have caught a glimpse of it now. It presented a look of blank despair, for Francis had just been retailing for his benefit every act of his on the night of the attempted disablement of the Ritter.

"And so to sum up," said his merciless tormentor. "You first tried to poison my ally, then stabbed to death two of his servants, finally in escaping wounded a personal friend of mine. Now what have you to say for yourself?"

Wilfred felt that there was nothing to be said. The count against him was so black that his one thought was of the sort of death he would have to suffer. But to gain time in case some brighter vista should open out to his mind, he put in dejectedly a plea for the proofs of all this guilt.

"Proofs?" cried Francis, and produced the empty poison phial which Wilfred remembered having kicked under the tavern table after using. "Proofs? What more do you want? The armourer's evidence, the inn-keeper's, the Ritter's,

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the three dead bodies? Pshaw! mere waste of time."

Wilfred did not deny the fact. He might have done so had he not caught at a straw of hope with which any amount of proofs did not interfere. "Come," he had been saying to himself, "Francis would not have sent for me unless there were some alternative to my immediate execution," and he at once put the supposition to the test.

"It would be waste of time, your Grace," he admitted, "so why did you send for me?"

"To see if your life be worth sparing."

"I am open to any offer subject to the dictates of honour."

"Honour, forsooth!" scoffed Francis, "all you Brandons lay stress on that, your kinsman with some claims to my respect, you with none whatever."

"I am at your Highness's mercy," remarked Wilfred submissively.

"Talk of something else," retorted the other.

"At your Highness's service then."

"But in whose service are you supposed to be?"

"Not Lord Suffolk's," said Wilfred, hoping to ingratiate himself with Suffolk's rival.

"So you say."

"I was born and bred at Kenninghall, Lord

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Norfolk's seat. Your Highness mayhap has heard of the feud between the two dukes ? "

" But you are of Lord Suffolk's lineage."

" My name shields me from his suspicion, hence my appointment as spy on his actions."

"Have you no better credentials ? " said Francis, still with an inflection of disbelief in his tones.

Wilfred searched his pockets and produced a letter from Norfolk. It was full of secret instructions.

" So far so good," said Francis, after he had carefully perused it; " but if, as this letter implies, you and your sister are engaged in that business, why did you mix yourselves up in this other ? "

" We serve our country as well when we find the opportunity."

" Oh ! a patriot I perceive."

" At least your Highness must do me the credit to believe that," urged Wilfred.

" I will tell you what I believe. You would sell your country and anything else for a consideration."

Now here Francis was wrong. Wilfrid loved his country and would have died in its service. But he did not say so. He had been slowly arriving at the conclusion that the Dauphin was in want of an unscrupulous person to do his dirty

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work for him. Life depended on his obtaining the unenviable appointment, and, as a qualification for it, Wilfred determined to create the worst impression of himself he possibly could. "Assuredly, my lord," was therefore the unblushing rejoinder.

"Bien!" said Francis, "you will answer my purpose."

"Which is?"

"To enter my service. But tell me your chief ambition."

The Englishman's eye flashed. Ambition was the weakness of his character and the strength of his actions. For fear lest he should name something beyond the Dauphin's powers to promote he pretended to be very catholic in his aims. "Nothing specific, my lord," said he, "only what every man covets—rank, honour, wealth."

"They can be earned. I have some influence with Henry of England; shall soon I hope have more. But lest you should fail me, let me remind you that this crime is not condoned, only held in abeyance. Henceforth you will have to look upon me as your god, meting out good and evil as you deserve them. Now to business. Those kinsmen of yours have just been appointed archers of the Queen's guard. Are you in a position to watch

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them closely? By the way, what position do you hold about the Queen?"

"Almoner, secretary, chamberlain. I make myself generally useful."

"She must be hard up for servants."

"She is. The King thought fit to make her so."

"Ah! I remember. Does she like you?"

"She does not distrust me."

"Hardly the same thing. Well, make her like you, make those brothers like you. Your sister can help there. Tell her what I know of her. No, not that: I never threaten a woman. Besides, mademoiselle and I are old friends. She loves that eldest brother. Turn her love to my ends. Go back to the Tournelles and commence your duties at once. Bring me word if there be anything worth my hearing. Intercept every message those brothers send away. Here, this is a list of persons at the Court you might find useful. Concert measures with them for advancing my interests."

"And your interests are, my lord?"

"Hostile to Lord Suffolk's."

"My lord?"

"Come, don't pretend ignorance. Suffolk and I play for the same stake. If I lose, look out, master poisoner!" and with this threat Francis rose to

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indicate the audience was over. He felt as comfortable after his morning's work as his august mother had after hers. Yet he at least would not have been so if he had witnessed the contortions of Wilfred's face, and plumbed the contents of his mind as he traversed corridor after corridor on his way to the street.

"That boy, my God! I do his dirty work! No, Francis d'Angoulême! Look to your spurs, my knight of the secret chamber, for you may need them as much as did your knights at Guinnegate when trying to best the men of my race."

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CHAPTER VII

THE GOLD SALAMANDER

THE position of the brothers in the King's household at St. Germain-en-Laye, did not become embarrassing at first. If, as they had been warned, scores of scheming eyes were upon them, they were not scheming themselves. Meaning no mischief, they feared none; in fine were rather amused than otherwise at the interest taken in them. Instead of the nickname "the Queen's fools" given them by Louise de Savoie, they had become known by the less opprobrious title of "the Queen's Brandons." Unfortunately it suggested the idea that they had been placed at Court for the very office they had refused to undertake. As Suffolk's confederates, moreover clumsy ones, they might have soon boasted of declining pretty nearly every bribe, from a woman's love to a priest's indulgence; for Louise de Savoie had been quite correct in calling them incorruptible.

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They showed they were good men and true in other ways. As officer of the Queen's archers the eldest was now a person of some note, and had risen to the occasion. The other two, *qua* brothers of his, had felt bound to rise too. There are traits even in your professional fool which are lovable; such as these the lads possessed. Their frank bearing had imported a sense of freshness into the corrupt atmosphere of the Court; their fidelity was quite an original trait there. Each, besides, had his especial accomplishments. Tony's behaviour when on duty was a subject of flattering comment; his port creditable even in a land of gracefulness. Not one of the King's Swiss could spring to attention more smartly than the once ungainly Ralph. It was his burnished breastplate the beautiful Marguerite de Valois once singled out of the whole line of archers at which to stop and preen herself. Before Roger could be got to show he was not a lay figure on parade, the *filles d'honneur* were reduced to throwing crumbs in his eyes. Spiteful tongues went further, and whispered that one of their number had acquired tangible evidence of the sensitiveness of another organ of his face; and it is certain that when informed of the conceit Roger had, being off duty, permitted himself to blush.

With regard to Tony there is even something

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more praiseworthy to relate. He was the recognised pattern of morality at the Court. Young bloods took their standard of rectitude from him. Never before had he set himself a higher. The reason for this does not inspire so much respect as its results. He felt that if he had swerved one hair's-breadth from the right path he would have lost his whole stock of self-respect. For, since he had come to live under the same roof with the woman he ought not to love, and the woman he had promised to, he had again found difficulty in reconciling his conscience to the trend of his affections. He had anticipated this when declining to labour any more in Suffolk's interests. His only excuse now for not ascribing to selfishness his abnormal devotion to those of Mary was to labour in the King's interests instead, and there was now no more ardent upholder of Louis' conjugal rights in his realm—indeed of conjugal rights in general.

But this subterfuge of an uneasy conscience did not escape the notice of the woman who loved him. It was unusual to take so strict a view of matrimony in times when even cardinals had their erotic passages, and with married women for preference. Lettice detected a hollowness about Tony's protestations of loyalty to the husband of Mary, and was shrewd enough to see that they were only the

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froth which hid from sight the passion which Mary had unintentionally set boiling within him. Now Lettice was determined that if she were to be thrown over in this scurvy fashion she would make her lover realise the full turpitude of the act. The end she had in view justified any means however hateful, and she contracted the habit of praising her rival, until, having insidiously drawn Tony on to speak in raptures of her, she would twit him with his guilty affection. But Tony soon saw through this, and would not rise to the bait; worse still, he began to avoid her, and that would never do. She longed to become indispensable to him in some way, and she found one much more to her liking than that she had been obliged to abandon. She was in a better position than her lover to learn all about Mary. She therefore constituted herself his newsmonger, taking care that her news should all be aspersive of her rival. Nobody else would have dared to besmirch the Queen's honour in his hearing; but ascribing it to jealousy on his behalf, Tony was lenient with Lettice. Indeed he began to invite these confidences as soon as he saw cause to believe they were founded on fact. Innuendoes and rumours did not prejudice him against Mary. Speaking of her as a coquette, ready for a flirtation with anybody—be it prince or archer—pitying the

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poor old King's infatuation for her, and so forth, did but provoke from him an enthusiastic defence of her wifely virtues, and the only way to silence him was the old taunt which had not paid. Seeing that he would not accept her views, Lettice appealed to the views of others, and laid stress on the continued presence of Madame d'Aumont in the palace after the children had been sent to Vincennes. What was she there for? As Mary's *dame d'honneur?* But it was not usual for *dames d'honneur* to sleep, eat, walk, ride, with their mistresses. No, Madame was a spy on Mary, and if he wanted to know who set her on, and for what purpose, let him ask Francis's mother or wife, or even the King.

Of course it was not practicable for Tony to do that; moreover, as he would take care to impress on Lettice, there was no need. He supposed she wanted him to believe that the Dauphin was the cause of Mary being watched? If so she must find some better excuse for Madame D'Aumont's continued presence there, because with Francis at Paris and the children somewhere else, Madame could not possibly be either spy or governess. Then would Lettice shut her lips tight, knowing this to be the surest way of evoking further questions. Thus it would gradually be drawn out of

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her that from Paris to St. Germain was not a long ride for a stalwart and ardent lover, that wooded glades served admirably for assignations, that there must be some greater attraction than the wild beasts for the Queen to brave adverse public opinion by leaving a sick husband in order to go hunting.

Eventually her lover's apprehensions would be aroused, not perhaps at the moment, but the next hunting day when he had to pace his sentinel's beat within the deserted palace. He would wonder if Francis were really having the hardihood to meet the Queen in yonder forest, and if with the carelessness of girlhood, she was so indiscreet as to encourage this fascinating prince. But on the whole Tony took heart of grace and maintained his trust in his mistress, setting store on the fact that Lettice, who always went with her, would be reduced to shaking her head knowingly when he asked her for ocular proofs of what she asseverated.

Meanwhile how about Lettice's brother? He had calmed down since last we saw him, was biding his time to be even with his oppressor. A comforting talk with his sister had helped him to a more dispassionate view of the situation. He had discovered that, so far from its being a harassing one, it was much the same as before. Francis had

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only demanded of him the office he had undertaken for Norfolk. True he worked for the old master out of love and for the new out of fear; but that was only a sentimental hardship. He might twiddle his thumbs for a while and yet be faithful to both employers.

The brothers needed no watching as long as Suffolk was out of the way. In view of future contingencies it would be well to cultivate the better relations with them which their joint conspiracy against the German had initiated. So it came to pass that his cousins never found Wilfred so friendly, and set it down to dread of their betraying the prominent part he had played in the bloody business at the tavern. Wilfred had taken care to sound his sister as to her sentiments for Francis, and had learned the lesson that a woman's love, not her gratitude, is the mainspring of her actions. In other words the obligation Lettice felt under to Francis for pardoning her lover was nothing to the obligation she felt under to that lover himself. Unless therefore Wilfred traded on this he would never get her to take up the cause of Francis, and the worst of it was that he feared that his life might one day depend on her so doing.

The *mise-en-scène* is now complete, the actors are in their places and the curtain may rise. It

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does so on an almost empty palace. The bright morning had tempted everybody out of doors; that is, everybody except those whom the calls of duty or the dictates of health obliged to remain within. Tony was one of these unfortunates, and Monsieur de Palaine, the offending sentry at the Hôtel Gruthuse, another. They had just watched the Queen's hunting party out of sight from an upper window, and were lingering there, partly to breathe in a little fresh air, partly to witness the commencement of a match at mall between the men of their respective commands. Presently, however, they went their ways, the one to the left the other to the right, until they turned and faced one another at either extremity of a long gallery. At their backs were doors, that at which the Frenchman was on guard opening on the King's suite of apartments, the other guarded over by Tony on the Queen's. The window at which they had been standing marked the meeting point of their respective beats, and they regulated their movements so as to reach the spot simultaneously. It was a tedious duty, especially for Tony, who knew that he watched over a set of empty rooms. The other had now and then the mild excitement of challenging an approach or bowing out a departure, as now, for example, when the royal leech came bustling

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out from a perfunctory visit to his august patient, bent on catching up the hunters before their sport began. Generally, however, nothing interfered with the monotony of the duty unless it were that a louder shout than usual from the mall players drew the two officers together at the window again to watch the fun.

It was now noon, the varlets of the chamber had finished robing Louis, the women had tidied up, and every menial had departed to the midday meal. This was the time when Louis took advantage of its solitariness to use the long gallery for his usual morning's exercise. At the sound of his outer door being opened both men drew themselves up into a soldierly attitude, and the moment he appeared Monsieur de Palaine preceded him walking backwards with uncovered head until he reached the exact middle of the passage. Then came Tony's turn, the French guard stepped aside to let the king pass, and the English one conducted him with the same respect to his extremity of the gallery. As a rule Louis would at once release the pair from this decorous but empty attention. On the occasion in question he seemed too worried and absorbed to notice it. He had even forgotten to bid them the customary morning's greeting. As he came halting after Tony with the aid of his gold

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handled stick he looked more feeble and haggard than ever. A wistful expression in his dim eyes, and a twitching of the mouth pained Tony to behold. Nobody could help pitying this sad, prematurely-old man, and Tony's regard for him had become more genuine than Lettice imagined. He kept expecting him to turn and continue his promenade in the opposite direction. But on he came straight up to the Queen's door, and halted for it to be opened. Tony observed him closely whilst performing this office and perceived he was trembling.

"You are ill, Sire!" exclaimed the compassionate fellow.

"Ill at heart more than body, De Longueville," and Louis patted the astounded archer on the shoulder. Then he seemed to realise his mistake, and with the irritability of one who has condescended to the wrong person, repeated his favourite oath, "the Devil take me!" and slammed the door in the Englishman's face.

For the next half-hour Tony found so much food for thought that he took small count of time. To be patted on the shoulder by a King and mistaken for a prince was a compliment that had not come in his way before. He was not in the least like Master Long-Will, as the brothers used to call the

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whilom proxy. He had never heard that the King's faculties were beginning to fail him. To what, then, could the aberration be attributed? The Duc De Longueville had lately been appointed to act as Mary's adviser, and in that capacity had been much with the King during the last few days. Louis's mind might, therefore, have been running on this prince just at the moment of entering his wife's apartments. "I suppose his wits were a wool gathering," summed up Tony, and turned his own to puzzling out the king's reason for this visit. Here also his train of thought came to satisfactory results. He was aware that Louis fretted about his wife when away hunting, and would imagine all kinds of disasters befalling her. Sometimes he would have up the man who groomed her horse to assure him that it had contracted no dangerous tricks. Once his fears got so great a mastery over him that he sent an equerry into the forest to bring him word if she were safe. It was, therefore, quite likely that an access of uxoriousness had drawn him to his wife's haunts to enjoy the associations such as her recent presence there might afford him. What was she about, wondered Tony, whilst her husband was fingering her belongings and conjuring up her image? Where were her thoughts just now, what her surroundings, who her chosen com-

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panions? It was on an occasion like this that Lettice's poison rankled.

A stifled cry from within, followed by a heavy fall, set Tony's heart thumping. He looked round to see if his comrade had heard the alarming sounds, discovered that his head was out of the window, so opened the Queen's door and began to search each room in turn for the King. He found him in Mary's bed-chamber stretched on the floor beside the bed. His first thought was to fly for assistance. One glance round the room dissuaded him. All the drawers were open, and their contents —trinkets, finery and the like—scattered about the tables. More significant still, the King's hand had closed tight on some invisible object. He kneeled down, unlaced the royal sufferer's partelet, listened a moment to his laboured breathing, noticed the distortion of one side of the face, the suds of froth gathering at the corners of the mouth, and realised that his wife's immediate return was an imperative necessity. So he lifted him tenderly on to the bed, laid him just where Mary had lain a little before, then flew off to Monsieur de Palaine. Hasty as had been his actions he had found time to mature his plans. He was resolved that nobody but the Queen, not even the royal physician, should find Louis in his present condition. He was prepared

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to take the consequences, which might be serious enough in all conscience, because if the King died he would be not only blamed for neglecting to send for medical aid, but, as Suffolk's kinsman, incur the suspicion of causing his death. Still less did the King's danger weigh with him. He believed it would be best for Mary if he did die, and, perhaps, quite the reverse if the mysterious article in her husband's hand passed into that of an ill-wisher of hers. With such thoughts coursing through his brain he encountered his comrade as soon as he opened the door; for De Palaine, in the capacity of the Dauphin's spy, had been listening there.

"Ah! mon ami," exclaimed the Frenchman, as he noticed the other's ill-suppressed excitement, "what is amiss? The King! he is ill?"

"Nothing that need concern you," faltered Tony; "the old ailment, misgivings about the Queen. I must send a messenger to her. Be good enough to call my brothers up to me. They are down there with the mall players."

"Bien, monsieur; and the King wants you back?"

"Yes, yes, I must not stay. He keeps thinking about the Queen."

"And desires you to think for him?"

"Yes—no!" and Tony turned the lock on him with a curse at his supposed jealousy.

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When he got back to the Queen's bedroom he found his patient in much the same state. The breathing was quick, the mind wandering. He felt the extremities; and, observing that they were clammy, began to chafe them. Each time he held the hand that was clasped he tried to catch a glimpse of what it contained. Then came Ralph's and Roger's knock at the outside door. He ran to unlock it and give his orders short and sharp.

"Listen, you two, there is some devil's work in here, and nobody but the Queen must know of it. Roger, get to horse and bring her back. God grant she may come in time. Ralph, hold this door against all comers. Use force if necessary."

Their newly-acquired discipline now served Ralph and Roger in good stead. Without a word they went their respective ways, and five minutes later the sound of a horse at a gallop informed the watcher that his tidings were on their way to the forest. An uneventful hour elapsed, during which the King dosed uneasily, then his mutterings became articulate. "No, Madame, I will not have her spied upon. Giddy, thoughtless, aye; but unchaste, never!" Again an interval of silence, then, "Why does she go hunting, you ask? Because I make her. It is so cheerless here for her. The room is close, and I would rather the lustre of the

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Miroir de Naples was dimmed than those eyes." Then trying to raise himself in bed, "Hark! what is that? De Longueville! De Longueville! I want you. Don't let them keep you from me!"

A sudden altercation in the corridor had aroused him, and Tony stole away to listen anxiously. He knew he could trust his brother to keep De Palaine out. But besides the tones of the cent garde were audible those of Madame d'Aumont, and even the resolute Ralph might think twice before turning a *dame d'honneur* away from her own apartments.

"I will pass!" shouted De Palaine, and "On your peril, sir, deny me passage any longer!" screamed the angry lady. Ralph's responses were too low to be heard, but Tony perceived he was trying to temporise with the foe. For how long would he be able to do that? Tony feared that fighting might begin any moment, and for the first time in his life he was driven by desperation into deception. As Louis again called the name of his wife's official adviser her devoted archer came running back, answering, "Here, Sire, at last!"

He had been mistaken once for the man, and clung to the hope that he would be again, but "Who are you, sir?" cried the King bewilderedly.

Tony did not dare to speak again, and luckily for him Louis again became drowsy and apathetic.

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Not for long, however; the next sign of sensibility was his feeling about as if for somebody's hand, and Tony gave him his.

"Ah, de Longueville!" he said, with a sigh of satisfaction, "you have found me at last. Send the others away, I want to tell you something." Tony's heart beat fast and furiously; another outcry from the gallery might spoil all. Happily Ralph seemed to have quelled the enemy for the moment.

"Are they all gone? Are we quite alone, de Longueville? I am so blind, getting old, I suppose —old enough to be her father."

"Indeed, you are," thought Tony ruefully; and the King continued as if in answer to the unspoken comment. "But, de Longueville, don't forget that under the father's wrinkles may lurk the lover's heart."

"Nor does she, I durst be sworn," cried Tony, carried away by the impulse of the moment, and the very next cursing himself for the folly of having spoken.

"Heaven bless you for that, sir, whoever you may be;" then pushing Tony's hand away, "but I want de Longueville," and when Tony slipped his other hand into Louis's, "Is that you, *mon ami?* Is the other gone? Well, then, give her this, but let nobody see you. And—and point out how im-

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prudent it is to hide such things under her pillow. That interfering woman might"—here he gave the ghost of a chuckle, "might suppose it to be a *gage d'amour!* A *gage d'amour* from the *gros garçon eh de Longueville*? Francis! why, she despises him, as you know quite as well as I do."

Tony relieved his feelings with a grunt of indignation, and at the same moment his hand closed over the coveted possession.

"No, de Longueville, it is not a matter that can be dismissed in that fashion. She is young and flighty, and I so old—so old!"

Another interval of silence ensued. Louis, as if his mind were relieved of some great weight, had begun to slumber tranquilly. Then was Tony's time to inspect his prize—only just time, it seemed, for the disturbance outside was worse than ever. It was a gold salamander. Where had he set eyes on it before? He remembered, and swore under his breath. Francis d'Angoulême wore one in his hat. The cause of the King's sudden distemper was now explicable. He had lavished jewels innumerable on his wife, every one a hundred times more valuable than this, and the careless way she had treated his gifts had been a subject of comment at the Court. This tribute of another gallant had, it seemed, met with a more

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worthy fate. Beshrew the woman, repeated Tony to himself, as he dwelt on the consequences of the King's discovery. He did not mean Mary, nor yet Lettice. He was not quite sure who he meant, so when a third time he whispered the imprecation he said, "Beshrew the wretch who has played this game of hide and seek with the King."

He suspected that the Dauphin's mother, after vainly trying to set Louis on his guard against her son by more ingenious means, had employed Madame d'Aumont to play this dirty trick. No wonder, therefore, that when Tony heard the outer door suddenly thrown open and some female rustling forward in the utmost haste, he thrust the trinket into his doublet and prepared for an ugly passage with the treacherous *dame d'honneur*.*

Here we must leave him to inquire what his brother Roger had been about all this while. He had galloped on and on, picking his way with little difficulty, for the ground in the forest was soft and the calvalcade had left abundant hoof-marks behind. The distant braying of horns mingled with the chiding of hounds warned him, however, that he was still some distance behind the chase. Presently he fell in with Madame d'Aumont

* [It is only fair to the memory of a real personage, as was Madame d'Aumont, to state that this incident of the gold salamander is pure fiction.—AUTHOR.]

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trotting disconsolately along in apparent search of her companions. She was the last person he wanted to meet, but there was no avoiding her, so he doffed his bonnet and drew rein beside her.

"Ah, le brave Monsieur Roger," she exclaimed, "and what brings you into the forest? Is all well at the Palace?"

Roger bethought him of the same excuse that Tony had adopted with the captain of the Swiss Guards.

"The usual errand, Madame, the King has sent for tidings of the Queen."

"Oh, the good tender heart! But would that I could tell you what you want. Hélas! I have missed her Highness, so am on the same quest. Let us ride together."

Roger swore *sotto voce* at his luck, then made the best of the situation.

"With pleasure, Madame, but the chase sounds to be over there."

"Where the Queen is not. I have left the hounds on that account."

"What shall we do, then? We cannot search the whole forest," asked Roger, and then he caught sight of Lettice ahead. It was only a glimpse, for his cousin had flitted across the track and was gone in an instant. Roger perceived that his

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companion had also noticed her, and without a word they began to ride in the direction whither she had disappeared. As they proceeded Madame put some embarrassing questions to him. She wanted to know if the King had given him his errand direct, whereabouts in the Palace he was, whether he were much perturbed, and so forth. At last poor Roger became desperate, and told her bluntly that she had better go and see for herself what was happening at home; then dug his heels into his horse's flank and out-distanced her. Madame, to his relief, did not attempt to pursue, but, to his dismay, called after him that she meant to take his advice and rode straight for the Castle.

The game in that quarter, Roger feared, had become more interesting to her than any that might be being played in the bosky depths around. But he consoled himself with the thought that if he had set his brothers a difficult task he had greatly eased his own, and that the silent Ralph was a fitter man than he to meet the importunities of this woman. Still, he did not feel very easy in his mind when he pictured Madame demanding admittance to her own rooms and being denied it.

He had not time, however, for much thought, for he found Lettice had halted just beyond the spot

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where he had last seen her. She was no longer alone, but stood dismounted beside her brother in an attitude of listening, At sight of him they both looked relieved and came forward to greet him.

"What in the name of witchcraft brings you here?" asked Wilfred.

"I am in search of the Queen, Louis is—is—wants her."

"Wants her! What for?"

"The King is unwell and they think she should be with him."

"Anything serious?"

"I hope not; I was told to make haste. Come, do either of you know where she is?"

"Not I," said Wilfred carelessly.

"Is the King very bad?" asked Lettice thoughtfully.

"What has that got to do with it?" said Wilfred with a meaning look at Lettice.

"Roger, answer my question," said Lettice, turning away from Wilfred.

"Well, yes. Tony said he hoped she might come in time. I am to bring her back at once," quoth Roger.

"She is sure to be with the hounds, so you had better be jogging," put in Wilfred.

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"Not at all," said Lettice, and looked defiance at her brother; then to Roger, "Is Tony with him?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Oh come, Lettice," answered Roger impatiently, "you ought not to keep questioning me. Tell me if you know where the Queen is or let me be off."

"Aye, you shall know."

"Then," cried Wilfred spitefully, "you will have to bear the full consequences, girl. I shall go and fetch the leech."

"Lettice," said Roger earnestly, as soon as they were alone, "the Queen must be there first; save her if you can."

"Save her! From what, Roger? Well, never mind, if you don't wish to say, but remember, whatever you may notice is for Tony's ear only;" then on Roger nodding assent, "follow that track until you come to that which you shall come to," and having delivered this oracular speech she cantered after her brother.

Ill at ease Roger pushed his horse into a trot along the narrow path, for though he had heard nothing of Lettice's confidences to his brother, her manner had impressed him with a sense of coming evil. Presently he turned a corner and beheld the Queen. She was walking beside her horse in

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his direction, having evidently overheard his approach. The crash of twigs being forced aside by some other rider caught his ear and then ceased. Whoever had been Mary's companion he was too late to ascertain. Roger knew that he had disturbed an interview, and he was curious to notice the expression of the Queen's face. She came hurriedly nearer and then he read not love, nor confusion there, but anger. Was it because of being disturbed? Hardly, for "thank God for sending you to me, master Roger!" she cried.

"And why, Madame?" asked Roger acidly.

"Ah!" cried she, and burst into tears.

Said Roger very gently, "And thank God I came. But mount, your Highness, and ride home for dear life—the King's, I mean."

She turned white at that and tottered, tried to command her powers to mount, and failed. Roger, seeing her condition, leapt to the ground and put her in the saddle. "He is dying?" she gasped, then before he could reply struck her horse with the whip and galloped towards home. Presently Roger caught her up, whereon, "Oh, Master Brandon, give me hope."

"Yes, if you get there first."

"First?"

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"The leech has been fetched. There are reasons why you should outstrip him."

"Reasons? Pshaw! I asked you for hope of the King."

"It may be nothing after all. The King appeared to be in a fit."

"If he survives I will never leave him again. Oh, Master Brandon, I love my Louis, I——" she checked herself and pushed ahead.

They won their race, but before they reached their goal there were sounds of discord, a woman's scolding voice, men's gruffer abuse, in the long gallery, and then a scene burst on their eyes which though inexplicable to Mary told Roger what was happening at a glance. About the Queen's door was a group of archers, Swiss and English, halberds were being flourished, bad blood was aroused; in the rear stood Madame d'Aumont hounding on those of her race.

"Strike the fellow down, men," de Palaine was shouting, "spare not, the King's life is at stake."

Then came Ralph's voice in response. "All true Englishmen rally to my side. The first Frenchmen who comes a step nearer dies."

Mary thrust herself into this commotion with the red guidon of anger showing itself on either cheek.

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"Way there for the Queen!" shouted Roger, and at that friend and foe formed an avenue for her to the door. Ralph stood aside and she passed within.

Madame d'Aumont bit her lips till the blood came, and departed downstairs.

Monsieur de Palaine glowered at the brothers, but felt constrained to draw off his men and follow her. Ralph and Roger ran to meet each other and locked hands.

"Saved!" said Roger with a sigh of satisfaction, and then the clatter of hoofs drew him to the window. Down below was the deserted scene of the mall match, yet not altogether deserted, for across it with slack rein and bloody spur galloped the leech.

"Minutes are precious now," cried Roger, and taking the key out of the door he locked it on the outside.

"There," said he, putting the key in his pocket, "by the time they have beaten that in the Queen will have done all she wants."

An hour later the three brothers were chatting calmly over the occurrence in their private quarters. Roger had just told Tony his experiences in the forest.

"There's hope," cried the elder brother, "in that burst of tears."

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"And in her anger when first I fell in with her," added Roger.

"We shall mayhap have to kill Francis d'Angoulême," said Tony thoughtfully.

"If he does not kill us first," suggested Ralph.

"But why did she give him a meeting?" asked Roger.

"That's her business," said Tony, in a voice that warned the others they were on dangerous ground.

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CHAPTER VIII

FETTERS OF GOLD

THE scene shifts to Paris, for Louis rallied from his strange seizure, and at Mary's earnest entreaty brought back the Court to the Tournelles. Henceforth those desirous of intriguing with or against her had to do so across his suffering form; and even Francis D'Angoulême, careless rake that he was, forebore to desecrate the love, which, if not all a husband could desire, was godlike in its sympathy and sacrifice.

It was the last day of the old year. The King was better, and the true men, who had begun to look melancholy, plucked up their spirits, whilst the time-servers who had been paying their court to the king of the future were feeling out of their reckoning. Can it be that the brothers have to be numbered amongst the latter? For later in the evening of the same day they were to be encountered picking their way through the wet windswept streets

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to an entertainment at the Logis D'Angoulême, of all places in the world. Yes, notwithstanding Tony's fierce forecast of their future dealings with Francis D'Angoulême, they were now visiting him for the purpose of supping at his splendid board. Certainly this is an incident requiring explanation, and, lest they should be mistaken for time-servers, here it is.

On first receiving the hospitable cartel at the hands of one of the Dauphin's messengers Tony was minded to return a polite refusal. Then Roger warned him that the gracious overtures of this powerful prince, if met in so churlish a spirit would only convert a dangerous friend into a deadly enemy. This led Tony to reconsider his answer. It was an unprecedented distinction for mere archers to be invited to the table of the heir apparent. Tony did not flatter himself with the idea that the offer was disinterested, and curiosity to learn the motive soon began to outweigh his reluctance to accept the favour. He had not the least intention of being feasted and flattered into something he did not approve of, and if he and his brothers should figure at the entertainment he meant to take care that nobody committed himself to any form of gratitude beyond a few suitable words of acknowledgement of their host's condescension and bounty.

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Even then Tony would not make up his mind to the step without taking counsel of Wilfred. At first sight it appears strange his resorting to this source of advice after the passage in the forest. His cousins had not failed to discuss amongst themselves Wilfred's conduct on the occasion. But the result was a mistaken notion of his relations with Mary and Francis. They rightly conceived that he had been set on to watch over the secret meeting—but by Mary instead of as actually by Francis. Wilfred had never breathed a word to them of his audience with the latter. Indeed they were not aware that he had exchanged a word with him at any time. On the other hand they had constantly watched him passing in and out of the Queen's cabinet, and had come to regard him, not without envy, as her confidential agent. In matters of business he was, but not in those which have their seat in the heart. Mary perceived that he was the only countryman of hers with whom she might converse privately wiithout incurring the interference of the contending factions which environed her with spies. This was because he was known to be inimical to the designs of Suffolk, not yet suspected of being interested in those of Francis. The Queen was obliged to employ somebody to transact the business with which all Queens are burdened, and Wilfred

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was the least objectionable member of her train to perform the office. So Louise de Valois and the Lady Claude, Francis and the King suffered him to come and go unquestioned.

The consequence was that the brothers imagined him to have been chosen by Mary for the delicate duty of warding off curious eyes from her stolen tryst with Francis. Tony, in his anxiety to clear her from all blame, went further and maintained that Mary, on finding herself forced into a clandestine meeting with Francis, had kept Wilfred within call in case she wanted to close the *tête-à-tête*. He actually put this version of the affair to Wilfred, who, seeing how willing he was to believe it, allowed him to do so more by implication than by words. He had, thus, he flattered himself, led the brothers to regard him as an ally against Francis, and the confidant of Mary, a stroke of business he considered the best he had performed since entering on his new career. When he found that the brothers wanted his advice about this invitation he played up to his new rôle and bade them accept it, not because he knew aught of the Dauphin's ends, but because of his obligation to this tyrant, and then cautioned them to be discreet, not because he was particularly anxious for them to be so, but because it was his aim to pose as their best friend.

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Forewarned and therefore as Tony hoped forearmed, the brothers set out for the entertainment. One good result at least they were expecting to derive from it, and that was a true explanation of the incident of the gold salamander. They all three believed that whatever might have been Francis's degree of culpability over the forest affair, in that of the Queen's chamber he had been more sinned against than sinning. When they found they were to sup alone with him they were quite prepared to learn as much in the course of the evening.

Francis received them with all the graciousness of one who had no equal in that line when he chose. His guards at the gates ported their arms as they passed in. His domestics met them with the respect due to regal guests. Such of his gentlemen as chanced to encounter them on the stairs moved out of the way with a low bow. He himself stood at the door of his private supper room with both hands extended in welcome. If those tapestried walls could have spoken they might have told of a far different reception accorded there to their cousin. The cloth was laid for a dainty feast. Medoc oysters, a light potage, lampreys from Nantes, a heron powdered over with sugar, pheasants garnished with Genoa artichokes and Barbary cucumbers, a roast sucking-pig stuffed with chopped herbs, iced

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Italian confectionery, and a dessert of Corbeil peaches, Lorraine pears, Madame Claude plums, all crystallised with sugar, such was the ample menu. Whilst these choice dishes were being enjoyed valets in gorgeous liveries tilted into their cups flagons of the most generous wines in France. *Clairette au miel* was followed by champagne, champagne by Juraçon. Francis proved himself to be the most engaging of hosts. He had stories to recount of former scenes in that room, scenes which had made history, scenes in which honours had been meted out to friends, disgrace to foes, scenes when reputations, principally feminine, had been made and marred. Whatever his ulterior object in all this familiarity it was not allowed to transpire until eating and drinking were at an end. That they were prolonged unduly was not his fault, except it were that his subtle power of chaining his guests' attention prevented them from seeing when they had had enough.

Francis now dismissed the attendants, thus removing all obligations for the observance of a rigid decorum. So far he had done most of the talking; now he found he could remain a listener. The champagne of 1515 was not different in its effects from that of the present day. Ralph, if he could boast of possessing the strongest body of the

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company, would have to admit the possession of the weakest head, and had waxed funny in his cups. Everybody, the host included, had drunk himself into a frame of mind when fun could be derived out of the poorest materials; Ralph's fun was by no means poor stuff. He had been drawn on by Francis to talk of his home, and had represented the subject in a playful light. Juraçon on the top of champagne, and encouragement on the top of both wines, had revived in him a long neglected talent. He was a born mimic, and now, to the intense delight of his host, he began to imitate the noises of his father's homestead. Everybody sooner or later tries his voice at this art. But here was a voice which had learned to bleat under the ewe, and to cluck in the poultry yard. If Francis laughed heartily over this part of the performance, he fairly roared when Ralph got to the human element of it. A flirtation between Biddy and Hodge in broad Lincolnshire was followed by a song in the same vernacular. Tone and gesture were his father's swineherd to the life, and that worthy had been neither tuneful nor gainly. To be quite perfect in the mimic art you have to part company with self-consciousness. Thus far Ralph, like a true actor, had merged his real surroundings in those which imagination had conjured up. The

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farm kitchen with Biddy and the rest sprawling on its settle, the bacon curing overhead, the dogs dozing at their feet, all of a sudden vanished, and the *farçeur* found himself back again in a palace feasting with a prince. The incongruity of the performance struck him forcibly, and believing that he had been playing the fool if not worse, he pulled up short in the middle of Hodge's dirge and began to look awkward. His relapse into gravity sobered his audience. Nobody had been really the worse for liquor, and nobody desired to become so.

Francis with ready tact interpreted the feelings of the company by closing the lid of the wine flagon and passing round the laver of rosewater, and the fact that he had not pressed his guests to further indulgence somewhat relieved them of the apprehension that they had been brought there to be betrayed into the admissions that such indulgence promotes. But at his next remark the countenances of the brothers fell.

"Now," said he, "suppose we draw our chairs round the reredos, for I have something yet to say."

"Now to business," was Tony's dry comment on this announcement.

"No," said Francis, "say rather to pleasure. And it gives me great pleasure to reward such faithful fellows as you."

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The three incorruptibles looked blanker than ever and began to fidget in their seats.

"Wrong again!" quoth Francis, who now watched them like a lynx. "It is not to purchase a favour but to pay for one that I have brought you here this evening."

They bowed the bow the late Queen's *sauvegarde* had taught them.

"By the way," asked their host, "where did you get that from? Not the farmyard, I durst wager," and then Tony told him all about their life in the Breton's castle. This delayed matters for a while. The Dauphin remembered their old preceptor and wanted to hear all about him. But at last he came back to "pleasure" as he had called it.

"You three gentlemen performed a service for me at St. Germain-en-Laye with an adroitness that I now know for the first time where it was acquired. That service it is my privilege and pleasure to requite." He rose, took three parcels out of a drawer and presented one to each brother. "Open them, my friends, and wear them in memory of this night."

Tony was the first to comply, and discovered a costly gold chain at the centre of which dangled the identical salamander he had succeeded in transferring from the King's hand into Mary's. His brothers' were replicas of the same ornament.

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"You are too grateful!" ejaculated Tony.

"It is nothing to what I perhaps shall be—I never forget a service."

"Nor an injury?" asked Roger.

"My conduct towards you since the tavern affair must be your answer, sir," said Francis reproachfully. "But now to speed the parting guest." He filled their goblets to the brim with Juraçon, then, "pledge me," he cried, "in a stirrup cup the health of one whom all cannot help but love, whom it is our duty as well as desire to love. Come, I have said enough."

"To her Grace the Dauphiness," called out Tony, and cocking his chin at Francis, drained his portion. His brothers grinned and followed his example; but Francis frowned and set his cup down after one sip.

"Good-night!" said he frostily, then recovering his *bonhomie*, "We part friends, is it not so?"

"Oh, certainly, my lord," assented Tony.

"Well, don't forget that."

"May nothing happen to make us," said Tony fervently.

"Nothing will happen," called Francis after them as they left the room. But only five minutes later he found occasion to think differently. The chamberlain who had ushered them below returned to

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draw his master's attention to three objects in the anteroom. They were the necklaces left behind on a chair.

"*Peste!*" muttered Francis, after dismissing the attendant. "They will be neither coerced nor coaxed," and he flung his discarded gifts back into the drawer, then opened the window to let out the fumes of wine. The fierce blast smote upon his heated face, and he quaffed of it far more freely than he had done of the Juraçon that evening. As if it were endowed with the same intoxicating effects, it threw him into a maudlin state, and looking in the direction of the Tournelles he began to invoke the spirit of her whom he had intended his guests to pledge to fly forth and meet him there. As to his heated imagination it seemed to respond, he whispered into the troubled night a flood of impassioned appeals until all at once he became dumb and listened intently. Then he sprang back to the table, seized the same cup at which before he had only tasted, and drank it to the dregs.

"To the White Queen!" he shouted, and waved it out of the casement, then glancing back at the débris of the feast. "An evening wasted! I can do without such virtuous knaves for the future."

Meanwhile those same virtuous knaves, as they battled their way homewards, were hearing what he

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had heard. The wind howled dismally, the sky seemed sobbing great tears, there was a note of mourning in everything. The great clock of Nôtre Dame began to toll midnight and suggested the same phenomenon.

"Brothers," said Tony, "it is the new year. We did wisely not to enter on it fettered to that man."

"Golden fetters!" said Roger half regretfully. "We have trifled with a powerful friendship. But why does that clock keep striking? Hark! what is that?"

It was the cry of the night watchmen as they passed on their rounds, but not the usual cry. It, too, suited the moan of the wind, the dismal drip of rain-swept eaves, the funereal gloom of the sky, and that solemn knell of distant metal. Seized with a foreboding of the truth the brothers drew near to catch what the men were saying.

"The good King is dead. Weep France for thy beloved father!"

Said Roger: "We did indeed slight a powerful friendship just now." But Tony cried, "Huzza for his Grace of Suffolk." And they marched home to the rhythm of all Paris's tolling steeples.

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CHAPTER IX

THE INSULT

It was the law of France for the King's widow to keep her bed six weeks in a darkened room. The snowy hue of her weeds obtained for her the name of Royne Blanche. Never had it been applied to a more fitting person than Marie d'Angleterre. Her dazzling white skin, the heritage of all the Tudors, had become a shade paler from long watching, and admirably matched her new surroundings. She was the White Queen *par excellence.*

The usual residence for such an one was the newly built Hôtel de Clugny, and, at the invitation of Francis, Mary at once crossed the Seine thither and entered upon her long term of dreary seclusion. As soon as she was safely housed Francis took steps to isolate her from all English influences. He disbanded her archer-guard and dismissed her gentlemen and ladies,

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only making an exception in the case of his putative allies, Lettice and Wilfred Brandon. The reason for this harsh treatment was that his relations with Mary the widow of Louis XII. had become more sordid than they had been with Mary the wife. He continued to play the lover with her for pleasure, but he did not allow pleasure to conflict with business. There was her magnificent dowry to look after, which, if she married out of his realm, would be lost to the Crown treasury. Henceforth therefore he wooed her for amusement on his own behalf, for business on behalf of his friends, the Dukes of Lorraine and Savoy, and other eligible bachelors. Mary secretly detested both forms of wooing, but she indulged Francis for this reason. She knew that Suffolk would come and save her from all her importunate lovers; and that, if Francis discovered she really preferred him, he might do him some deadly ill. This explains much in her conduct that has puzzled the historian. Because of her fears for Suffolk's safety she allowed herself to be thought an unchaste wife, and the same slur to be cast on her widowhood. Like Penelope of old she wove and unwove a web; and in compensation for her spurious tenderness for Francis when present gave rein to her disgust in his absence. The only person to whom she felt

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she could be genuine was Lettice Brandon, the last confidante it may be considered she ought to have chosen as well as the last she would have, had she been aware how spiteful the girl had been about her. But Lettice was a different being from the Lettice of St. Germain-en-Laye. Poor little soul! She had wept many a bitter tear of late; for, since the affair of the gold salamander, Tony had been more estranged than ever. In her great unselfish love she had grown submissive, and was prepared to fetch and carry for him like a dog if haply he might throw her a sop of comfort, were it only gratitude. In this deplorable state she was just the person to sympathise with any other of her sex whose course of true love was running turbulently. Her royal mistress was in this predicament, and as soon as they read the unspoken trouble in one another's eyes, they forgot the difference in their respective ranks, and, as woman and woman, instinctively drew together. Out it all came, Mary's love for Suffolk, Lettice's for Tony, Tony's for Mary. The way the supposed rival tossed her head when she, a King's daughter and sister, learned that she was beloved by a mere archer, broke down the last barrier of Lettice's reserve, and the pair wept in one another's arms and swore eternal friendship.

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One result of this, it may be said the chief result, was that Tony at last succeeded in making Lettice a valuable go-between in his dealings with Mary. Of the archer guard all its members were now on their way to England except the three brothers. They had hired the nearest available lodgings to the new quarters of their late mistress and were making the best of the altered situation. Their only connecting link with Mary now was Wilfred and his sister, so they at once put themselves in communication with them. Tony was too true a man to traffic on his sweetheart's affections. But he once more lent a willing ear to any thing she had to tell him about the Queen, and for this purpose they met constantly. Lettice did not blink the fact that his renewed interest in her was vicarious. But in her chastened mood she was no longer disposed to be distant with him on that account. She had found her lover's neglect so unbearable that she welcomed any circumstances that put an end to it. Besides, this one promised to turn out useful to both herself and mistress.

Francis's spy, Wilfred, soon reported to him that his cousins were hanging about the Hôtel de Clugny. He raised no objection. Then Wilfred brought him word that his sister was receiving them within the proscribed portals. Still he raised

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no objections. Lastly Wilfred intercepted a letter of Tony to Suffolk and brought that also to his illustrious taskmaster. It contained only four words, "the time has come," but Francis understood them. "No," said he to his agent, "the time has not yet come, when it does I will strike. No need to strike prematurely. Go back to your duties, and bring me word of anything further," and Wilfred stuck his tongue into his cheek and went.

For that desperate individual had begun to play a double game, commonly called "running with the hare and hunting with the hounds." He had no settled plan as yet, except the determination to be true to the interests of his real employer, Norfolk, and on the look out for a chance of casting off the yoke of this other. Neither Suffolk nor Francis should gain their ends with Mary if he could help it. He had a shadowy notion of somehow playing off one against the other through the instrumentality of his simple cousins. They were to be his puppets, so for that matter was his sister, so Mary, so everybody. He was well aware of what failure meant to himself as showman. He was no coward, and would rather have dashed himself to bits in a terrific venture than go on fretting himself to death in his present circumstances. Besides, to give him his due, he was too

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true an Englishmen to further Francis's disgraceful intrigue with the most precious of England's daughters.

So Wilfred went about his business, Francis about his, Tony and Lettice about theirs, whilst Mary lay still and wept, and presently the time for action arrived. Francis precipitated it by one evening imbibing more wine than was good for him.

It happened in this wise. He had been entertaining a few of his closest friends at supper in commemoration of his late rise in life. He was not actually King until after his *sacrèing* and coronation, and these ceremonies had to wait for the certainty that Mary would have no son. After that, so he told his guests, they should learn how a king rewards the favourites of his former state. "But," he went on to say, "before I assume the dignity and gravity of a crowned head I will figure once again as your madcap Francis," and he bade them put on their vizards and sally out into the streets for a last frolic.

They insulted every man and frightened every woman they met, and then some sprite of darkness drew them over the Seine bridges into the vicinage of the Hôtel de Clugny. There Francis managed to separate from the rest, and in lust born of too

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much liquor stole alone to the domain of the White Queen. All were his creatures there, not even Madame d'Aumont was at hand to gainsay his will. Those who let him in, if they guessed his purpose, got out of the way, but that was the extent to which disapproval took them. He lurched up the stairs and along the gallery, and came plump on Wilfred Brandon passing away from the Queen's apartments.

"Hah!" hiccoughed Francis, "well met, my prince of potioners. Have you by chance about you a love philtre?"

"Is this wise, your Highness?" asked Wilfred gravely.

"As wise as your fine doings at that tavern, master back-stabber. Get out of my way."

"The Queen is indisposed, and begs to postpone the honour of this visit till morning," said Wilfrid stiffly.

"Who told her of it, I should like to know? Take care, fellow; no meddling in my concerns," and Francis tried to push him aside.

"Oh, your Highness, pray you reflect; there is danger in this business."

"Danger! to whom? To you, I suppose. I agree; there is great danger if you say much more."

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"I meant to France, Sire."

"As how?"

"Henry of England will fiercely revenge any—if there should be any——"

"If what?" broke in Francis impatiently. "If I pay my homage to his sweet sister?"

"She is alone, Sire."

"So much the better."

"It is close on midnight."

"The very hour for me. Stand aside, I say."

"This means war," cried Wilfred, still not budging.

"Say rather love."

"England's defiance will be here before three weeks are past," persisted Wilfred.

"All France shall hear my response from the marble table of the Palais Royale," retorted the intoxicated King, adding, "but if you don't stand aside this instant you will not be alive to hear it."

"Sire, for your own sake I refuse."

"Pooh, man, you are drunk."

"*I*'m not," said Wilfred. The emphasis on the personal pronoun did not escape the notice of Francis.

"*Foi de gentilhomme!*" he cried, drawing his sword, "you become insulting. *A moi*, the guards below!" Then as the men came dashing up,

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"Attach this knave, and take him off to the Grand Châtelet. Say he is to be put in the Fin d'Aise."

The halberdiers shuddered at the name of this notorious *oubliette* as they led off their wretched prisoner, and as soon as they were gone Francis stepped up to Mary's door. He found it locked.

"Adorable being, open," he cried in maudlin tones, "it is thy troubadour. Listen, hard heart! I will serenade thee," and he began to chant with vinous pathos one of his accomplished sister's love ditties. Still receiving no response he hammered impatiently on the panels with his sword pommel. At last, growing furious, he bawled out for some one to fetch a locksmith. Then at last the door opened and Mary stood before him with her snowy mourning clinging about her.

"Marry, Sire! at least I will spare myself that abasement. You shall not bring all Paris in to witness my dishonour and your infamy."

The King sprang towards her and clasped her in his arms, upon which, overwhelmed with a gust of Tudor masterfulness, she flung herself free and stood like a tigress at bay. The next instant up rushed the three brothers sword in hand.

The sight of their fierce faces sobered Francis. The Roy Ribaud changed back into the Roy

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Chevalier. In marked contrast to his late insolence he addressed himself with a fine dignity to the agitated Mary, doffed his hat, and, holding her by the tips of her fingers, pushed her gently from the threshold of, and shut her into, her own stronghold.

"We will finish the rest of this business in the street, if you please, Messires," he said, and flicking aside their blades with his hat strode imperiously past the brothers downstairs. Tony at least understood him, and his face lighted up with the joy of coming battle. He was determined to kill or be killed that night; but he had a duty to perform first.

"I will be with your Grace in a minute," he said, and twice swept his hat from right to left, then motioning to his brothers to hold the landing he turned and tapped at the Queen's door. Receiving no response he called out his name, then she opened to him. He followed her into a room draped with white, where half a dozen tall candles which burned day as well as night, lit up her face. He saw that it was tear-stained, and in a transport of pity dropped on one knee, and seizing her hand kissed it fervently, then whispered, "Madame, I am here to take your orders."

"My orders, Master Brandon? nobody heeds

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them. If you were to do so, he would have you put out of the way. Is he gone?"

"As good as; he waits to transact a little business with me. God grant it may end in his never troubling you again."

"He will fight you? Oh sir, kill him, kill him! No, not that! See, you must not cross swords with him in his present state, it would not be fair."

"You take a great interest in the matter," said Tony resentfully.

"Indeed I do; I am thinking of your Lettice. As for him, I loathe the monster, but he must not know it. I have my reasons; respect them, sir."

"Good, so far," said Tony grimly, "but what about yourself, Madame?"

"Ah me! I cannot bear it much longer."

"And need not. Listen, Madame, and I will repeat what you said to us at Greenwich? 'Maybe the day will come when if three such Englishmen as you stood offering me the chance you offered just now I would jump at it.' The day has come, we are here, all three—and the offer is repeated."

"What! You mean it? I am to escape? Ah! but it is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible to the cause of Right against Wrong, Madame."

"Oh, if it could be! if it could be! But how?

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You may not even be allowed to reach home to-night alive. He has all Paris—all France—at his beck and call. You are undone, sir," then with a sob, "Mary Tudor will ever remember this, offer to die for her sake."

"Then if I do I shall be content. But pluck up heart, Madame, heaven is on our side."

"I shall pray the night out that it may protect you, and if I am answered you shall hear from me again. But get out of this duel, if not for your own sake for—your Queen's."

"The queen of my heart," cried Tony passionately, and was about to linger a moment longer when the angry voice of the King outside made him start to his feet. The Queen hastily withdrew into her closet, and Tony returned to the gallery.

"So, sir," cried Francis, as soon as he saw him, "it seems you have privileges which kings have to sigh for in vain."

"I am now at your service, Sire," said Tony, ignoring the allusion.

"Which is to betake yourself to a world where your betters do not resent impertinence."

"Or to send you there to learn the lesson of their magnanimity," retorted Tony, upon which Francis picked up his sword and ran downstairs.

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CHAPTER X

A CHORUS OF ANGRY STEEL

TIME now to explain the brothers' opportune arrival on the scenes, to do which we have to inquire what Lettice had been about all the while.

When Francis entered the Hôtel de Clugny, she was downstairs in her own room getting ready for bed. The loud altercation between him and her brother drew her as well as others out to listen. She kept clear of the rest and soon heard sufficient to feel sure that Mary was about to be reduced to the most desperate straits. Carried away by the impulse of the moment she determined to call in the aid of her cousins. She had no difficulty in gaining the street. The Queen's maids occupied a small ante-room opening on the garden into which they could descend by means of a spiral staircase. The sentinel at this back exit was Monsieur de Palaine, and on receiving the pass-word he suffered her to proceed. More of him anon, for the moment

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we may leave him to wonder at her mission abroad at that hour. She flew through the streets, burst in on the brothers with her news, and only when she discovered that they were for coming back with her did she realise what she had done. Her lover was as good as lost, and she to blame. In her remorse she besought him to turn back and leave the Queen to shift for herself. He obstinately refused to do anything of the sort and pushed ahead of her.

Disposed now to draw terrors from every circumstance, she recalled to mind having passed a body of masked gallants in the Rue des Maturins St. Jaques, and close to the Hôtel de Clugny. What if they were connected with the King's visit there? The idea so spurred her energies that she raced up to Tony and gasped out a word of caution as to keeping a sharp look out ahead.

"Listen," she went on, as the sight of the supposed enemy drawn up before the entrance of the Clugny brought them all to a sudden halt, "if you are determined to thrust yourselves into this coil I must go on and prepare the way for you."

On their consenting she bade them follow closely and led them round to the garden at the back, thus avoiding the suspicious looking group in front. They had no difficulty in finding the door

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into the garden, but the closed postern which Lettice had used in leaving the building brought them to a halt. Bidding them keep out of sight until she gave the signal for them to rush past her soldier ally, she tapped at the door and was admitted. Then, so that the brothers should not be shut out, she stood in the threshold whilst she parleyed with its keeper. He was, as has been already related, Monsieur de Palaine, the same soft-hearted gentle who had allowed her to listen outside the guard-room at the Hôtel Gruthuse. The risks he had run for that dereliction of duty had, he considered, afforded him a claim on Lettice for a little harmless love-making now and then, and the girl had so far recognised it as to endure without contempt the amorous glances he constantly shot at her. On this occasion she was prepared to submit to still greater liberties; began quite a flirtation with him, and in her emergency became more encouraging than was prudent. He, for his part, was a bold wooer, and having long hankered for a kiss now took one under the eyes of her real sweetheart. Perhaps the poor maid submitted the more readily because she hoped for a display of Tony's indignation at this poaching on his manor. If so she was destined to disappointment. Whilst yet in the soldier's embrace, and before she could find a

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chance of making the signal, the brothers were past and gone, leaving her to explain as best she could their daring intrusion to her now alarmed admirer.

Though he had not recognised Tony, he was aware that Lettice had tricked him, was for not stopping to listen to any explanation, and tried to thrust her away and overtake her allies. But Lettice clung too tightly for that, and at the same time protested that he had nothing to fear, that she was the last person to bring him into trouble, that all would be right if he remained where he was, and (Heaven forgive her!) that she would do her best to console him for the little annoyance. The archer soon took her at her word. To be held prisoner in a pretty maid's arms was worth risking something for, especially when she had as good as told him he might take pre-payment for whatever he might have to suffer. The form he chose was some more kisses; Lettice submitted like a martyr, or rather, to adopt her own simile, like a true woman who should immolate her all in her sweetheart's cause. But the whole while she kept thinking that her sweetheart was doing much the same in another woman's cause, and that at best she was only helping him to do it. Those five minutes with Monsieur de Palaine witnessed one of the most heroic actions Lettice was called

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upon to make for her false swain; and though a little later that night she shed her blood for him, it was nothing in comparison. Alas for her! Tony had been too harassed with fears for Mary to think much about what she was enduring for his sake, and we must do somewhat the same by returning to witness the end of his quarrel with the King.

The night was clear, the moon at the full; so, as soon as Francis gained the open he easily made out the dark forms of his companions posed in a semi-circle round the gateway of the Hôtel. Instinctively they had tracked him to the dwelling of the White Queen, and knowing his condition, were waiting to see him safely home. Most, if not all, answered to some of the noblest names in France, and not one was likely to approve of this midnight invasion of the widowed Queen's privacy. Indeed, they had been in the act of intervening on her behalf, when the guards escorting Wilfred to prison appeared, and informed them that the arrival of the brothers had rendered it impossible for their royal master to persevere any longer in his wicked purpose. The gallants outside were therefore prepared to behold the King in company with these Englishmen, and rather relieved than otherwise at their interposition. Francis's first words turned relief into glee.

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"Ha!" cried he, "there you are, my friends. Welcome every one. You are in time to take part in the crowning excitement of the night. These three gentles seek the honour of a passado with us. Permit me to introduce them. The three Messires Brandon. Messires Brandon, these are—what shall I call them?—fools without their motley. You will be well matched, you see. But listen, mes amis; the eldest Englishman is my property, the other two are at your disposal. Those who are content to remain onlookers be good enough to form a circle with your torches so that the rest of us can see to kill one another."

This proposal met with a ready assent at first, but not after a moment of reflection. Though every hand had stolen to the hilt there was a set punctilio to be observed in these affairs of honour. Another obstacle to immediate combat was the King's drunken condition. None of his friends would have dared to raise it, but Tony, thirsting as he was for Francis's life, remembered Mary's words and tried to do so.

"Saving your Grace's reverence," said he to the King, who with dagger and rapier was now advancing upon him, "was not the sherbet too strong to-night?"

"Pooh! man," was the careless response,

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"drunk or sober I am more than your match," and he made a pass at him.

"Yet, if I chance to wound you, it will be as much wine shed, I fear, as blood," said Tony with supreme ignorance of pathology, and at the same time easily fencing off the feeble thrust.

Meanwhile the rest of the company were arranging matters. "I, for my part," said one, "have chosen this huge fellow. But before I enter upon a pastime of this description I like to be sure that I shall not sully my blade with puddle blood. Tell me, therefore, good knave, how many muster to your father's banner in time of war?"

"All Lincolnshire, were the quarrel with a king of yonder sort," said the insolent Ralph, and with a shout of rage his man rushed upon him.

Lastly there was Roger. "And you, little sir?" asked another, touching him with his point to command attention, "mayhap you have a less insulting answer to give. Tell me, therefore, the number of the quarterings on your tiny shield?"

"I would rather carve them on your body, gentle master," replied Roger with icy civility.

"By the mass! Charles," remarked one of his friends, "we shall get no change out of them in word play, and I think you might have spared us

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this defeat when you found the King content to cross blades with the churls."

Another moment and all three pairs of duellists were at their deadly game.

It was a noisy scene on the French side, combatants as well as spectators keeping up a run of comments on the shifting fortunes of the fight. Thus "Ah! that was worthy of the great Carranza," cried one. "Oh, button-butcher!" shouted another as a shrewd foin ripped open Roger's doublet above the stomach. "Henri," bawled a third admiringly, "your porte de ferro is beyond criticism." "Habet! you have set the Englishman's Cyprus running," yelled a fourth as his friend parried a fierce lunge of Ralph's and returned an imbroccata, which the Englishman only partially fended from his neck with his dagger. But he was only wounded enough to cause him to lose his temper. "Curses on these tuck affairs," roared the giant, "I will have no more of your dancing round me," and taking advantage of a moment when the torchlight fell only on the form of his antagonist he closed with him and threw him backwards into the adjacent river.

The attention of the other combatants became distracted by a roar of "Foul play!" They remained idle, gasping for breath, whilst the spectators

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continued to use theirs freely in execration of Ralph's act.

"This comes," growled one, "of fighting base-born men." "We ought to have known that they were swashbucklers," said another. "No harm done," remarked the King, who, finding to his surprise that Tony was pressing him more than he considered quite safe, was ready to welcome any excuse for stopping. "Some one pull Henri out of the water and I will soon right the rest of the business." To the brothers. "Since you don't seem worthy of an honourable death I must find you some other." To his friends. "Draw every man, and help me arrest these parlous rogues," and immediately half a dozen fresh blades were bare.

The brothers had just time to close up and make a running fight of it. Wearied, however, by their late exertions they were soon outpaced and surrounded. With a plunge like one of his father's Lincolnshire bulls Ralph broke through the ring of deadly steel and set his back against the nearest wall, his brothers using the avenue thus made for the same purpose. But that would only have postponed disaster had not suddenly the form of a woman appeared amidst the whirl of blades. It was Lettice, distraught with love and fear for Tony.

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The moon shone full on her face of agony; it shone, too, on her blood; for she had not managed to burst in without a wound. Those who had unwittingly inflicted it shrank back abashed. Lettice seized her opportunity and pointing to the door in the wall through which she had just issued whispered, "Fly, they won't hurt a woman, at least one who is not a queen." And the brothers holding the same opinion did as she directed and found themselves once more in the garden of the Hôtel de Clugny.

"Enough, Mademoiselle," said Francis softly, "I always pay homage to Love. It conquers where all else fails. Besides, the sanctuary you have chosen for your friends is Love's shrine." And he wrenched the scarf from his neck and bound it round her bleeding arm. Then turning to his people, "Come," said he, "for we must do nothing more to-night. To-morrow even the white wings of La Royne Blanche shall not shield the knaves," and Lettice, overhearing the threat, sobbed aloud as she flew back to the brothers.

"What next?" asked Tony cheerily, putting his head out from behind a bush, then remembering what he owed to the devoted girl he led her aside, and bending kissed her ready lips.

"Oh! Tony," she whispered, "do it again and

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again. Naught but your kisses can wipe out the stain of those others."

Her lover obeyed with a careless laugh. "Poor little wench!" he said humorously, "I saw that the fellow made you pay dearly for the office. But all's well that ends well."

She broke from him at that. His caresses had been too brotherly for her liking, his manner hardly as much as brotherly. Was this all the satisfaction she was to have for her night of humiliation? If only he would show a little anger. He had not even asked after her wound, perhaps had not noticed it. No, she saw how it was to be. Smarting limb and smarting heart must be kept to herself. Besides, it was not the time to consider them. Her lover was safe only until morning, and a comfortless bivouac in the open before him. At this last thought she glanced towards the postern door. Perhaps if she were to yield up her lips once again to the same abasement she could purchase the comfort of a roof over his head. She looked up apprehensively at him to see if he would demand this fresh sacrifice, and found that his eyes were levelled at the Queen's window.

"There is a light there," he said softly, "may be she is still on her knees praying for me. Heaven hear her, not for my sake but her own." Then as

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Lettice made an impatient gesture, "Aye, little lass, you are right to hurry me. The time is short and there is much to do."

"What can you do?" she asked with a sob; "he will have you by dawn."

These words set Tony's thoughts in a fresh vein. He recalled the other occasion when he had encountered those gallants, and Francis's words about them. "Bear in mind that there is no sanctuary for you in the whole of France if these people once receive my orders to destroy you." He had spoken then as a subject, now that he was King the menace sounded more alarming still. Yet Tony had set himself the task of extricating Mary from her unbearable surroundings by carrying her off to England. What a mockery the promise to her seemed now when he owed this respite from immediate death to his position under her window. The dismay in his face was reflected in Lettice's. She had been watching him narrowly. The moonlight shone full on his eyes, beautiful brown orbs that had once been full of tenderness for her. Now they had a hunted look in them; to Lettice it appeared the presage of coming death.

"Cannot you wait here till the Queen is up, and then throw yourself on her protection?"

"No," answered Tony, "that would never do.

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It would lead to a fresh commotion here. The Queen must be spared that at all costs."

"What then?" asked Lettice apprehensively.

"Go somewhere else, I suppose."

"Not back to your lodging?"

"As well there as anywhere, and at least we should be under cover. But listen, Lettice, Mary has agreed to escape if we can provide the means. I can't say yet how we shall manage that. Maybe God will manage it. Enough that Mary wishes us to make the attempt."

"She does?"

"Aye, and you must help us."

"Do you mean me to come too?"

"Hum!" said Tony discouragingly.

"Oh, you surely won't leave me here all alone? I could not bear that."

"Not if I promise to come back never to be parted any more?"

"What! Tony, you will marry me?"

"Why, sweetheart, we settled all that long ago. Only the Queen's business has delayed it. I have lent myself to her for a time, you understand."

"Yes, I understand," said Lettice choking, and then she nodded a short good-bye and tapped at the postern.

Her faithful de Palaine was there to let her in.

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She feared he would stop her to ask what she had been about all that while, perhaps to renew those disgusting liberties. She felt that with the taste of Tony's kisses still on her mouth she would die before she submitted to another's. Happily the fellow did not require anything of the kind; quite the contrary, for he had not even the civility to wish her good-night. The fact was that he had stolen out another way and listened to every word that had been said by the lovers. He was to be under arrest the next morning, he had been told, and was aware that only because of the depletion of the little garrison caused by Wilfred's affair he was not in hold already. But he was undismayed by his alarming prospects, believing that he had news for his superiors which would procure his pardon.

"Come back and marry you, fickle jade!" he kept muttering, "not he! he will never even go," and the soldier cursed women in general and Lettice in particular.

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CHAPTER XI

THE GAME PASSES INTO THE HANDS OF THE KING

THE morrow's sun rose over palace, lodging and prison. Presently it began to peer in at the brothers sleeping off their exhaustion, Francis his debauch, and at Mary and Lettice fretting wakefully over their troubles. Sleep however profound, vigils however prolonged, vanished under its refreshing influence and, with a yawn or sigh, our *dramatis personæ* bestirred themselves.

All save one. Wilfred in the Fin d'Aise of the Grande Châtelet knew not that the sun was risen, being far beyond its reach, crouching in fetid water up to the iron bracelets on his ankles, and in stillness only broken by the croak of a frog or the splash of a newt.

Picture the man's condition! A few hours before he had been full of hopes and plans. The capacity to hope and plan remained, but without a

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particle of matter to feed upon. Some would have found solace in the thought that they were suffering in a righteous cause. Wilfred, the godless wretch, looked back on the folly only of having opposed the King's wicked ends. If he had ever thought much of a Creator he would have cursed him. For want of some being responsible for his existence he bestowed his curses on the man who had undone him. But before long the ability to hate as well as every other mental faculty became swallowed up by horror. He underwent all the awfulness of mortality without any of its palliatives, being seized with the belief that he had been buried alive. The very manner of his being cast into this loathsome pit lent colour to the terrible suggestion. He had been shot like a corpse through a hole in the pavement, and the stone which had been replaced over his head differed from a tombstone only in that it bore no epitaph. How soon, he wondered, will these writhing reptiles begin to prey upon me? and he shrieked out in his anguish.

Here we must leave him for a while to follow the fortunes of our more interesting characters.

Of the brothers, Ralph had been the first to arouse himself. He sat up in bed and felt his neck. The blood had dried on the wound and it was stiff and sore. The movement attracted the

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attention of the other two. They also drew themselves into a sitting posture with the bed-clothes huddled up to their chins, hands clasping knees underneath. Ralph's usually placid countenance wore a frown, and Tony, thinking his injury was the cause, asked if it was troubling him. "Not much," responded the silent giant, and began to knit his brows more severely than ever. Was it the thought of their danger? No! Well, what then?

Thus pressed for an explanation Ralph began to hum and haw. The fact was that since waking he had been gradually bringing himself face to face with a disagreeable task. Years ago he had lost his heart to his cousin Lettice, but when once he saw that she had thrown the kerchief to his eldest brother he had grappled with and throttled the passion. Yet of late, since he had witnessed her unhappiness, it had come to the fore again. In his simple fashion he had set to work to divine the cause of her trouble; and thus, though the slowest of the trio in perception, he was the first to discover Tony's love for the Queen. He felt it now his painful duty to lecture his elder brother on his morals, and, never having presumed to do so before, he was at a loss how to set about it. Already there was a look of mild surprise on Roger's face, whilst

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Tony's was becoming stern as if he suspected something unpleasant in store for him.

"Look here, Tony," said Ralph at last, "I am as leal to the Queen as you or anybody, but Lettice has the first claim, because she is my cousin and some day, I hope, will be my sister."

"Yes?" asked Tony arching his eyebrows.

"Well, only that her trouble comes before the Queen's."

"What trouble?" said Tony.

"Ah, what?" echoed Ralph with a meaning look at his brother.

"Come, out with it, lad, if you can; though I expect you have been only getting into some mare's nest."

"Lettice's trouble is no mare's nest. Girls don't cry like she did last night for nothing," said Ralph sturdily.

"Of course they don't. The Queen's danger, ours, to say nothing of the sword scratch, were enough to open the sluice of a girl's tears."

"Come, Tony," said Ralph, in a tone that showed he felt his brother was not open with him.

"Hey-day! here's a pretty ado about nothing at all," cried the other angrily, "leave me and Lettice to settle our own grievances, if you please, brother Ralph," and Tony began to wash and dress.

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"Stop a bit," interposed Roger, who had been an interested witness of the passage. "Ralph, old gossip, I have been blind all this while. God grant that Tony has also. But you have opened my eyes to the danger, and Tony may not shut his any longer. Aye, Tony, you are bound to hear us out. This is our business as much as yours, because our three lives are wrapped up in it. We came to France to serve the Queen, or, to put it in your own words, to prevent a woman's heart from breaking. A proper end to our knight errantry if another woman's heart gets broken instead!"

Tony was at first speechless with the shame that these words evoked in him. Here were all his carefully concealed scruples rendered articulate by others' tongues. He had understood the implication in Ralph's first words, and his dulness of perception was feigned. But he had been too long the leader of the three to brook a hectoring however wholesome. "Nonsense," he said, with a toss of the head.

"But nonsense such as I will be no party to," remarked Ralph.

"Then we separate," said the despotic Tony; whereat Ralph, who when aroused was a hot antagonist, would have widened the breach by some impolitic retort, had not Roger played the peacemaker.

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"Let him be, Ralph, let him be," said the little man, "the spell works, and presently Tony's heart will speak true whatever his tongue may say," and Roger kneeled to truss his elder's points.

Then came just the occurrence to reunite the brothers—namely, danger. It not only prevented renewal of the altercation, but took Tony's mind off the worrying subject, and gave his brothers an excuse to return to their allegiance. The sound of the door of the outer apartment being softly locked upon them was the first intimation of its insidious approach.

"Prisoners!" ejaculated Tony; then bitterly, "whilst we have been fooling here the foe has been busy. It is no longer women's fancies at stake, but men's lives."

"Say rather both, and both ruined had we not come to this understanding," responded Roger, scrambling into his clothes.

"Much good will an understanding be now," muttered Tony as he moved towards the window.

"Every good," was the cheery rejoinder, "we have just cast Jonah overboard, God and fortune now favour us. Ho! brothers to the rescue of both Mary and Lettice; up and be doing."

"Fine talk!" sneered Tony, "see, the place is

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watched by the King's men," and he pointed towards the street three stories below.

Another moment, however, he had recovered his good humour and was once more the superior officer of the archer guard. A short deliberation satisfied the brothers as to the tactics of the enemy. It seemed that all had been accomplished for the present that was required. They were to be detained in their lodging, pending instructions of a more definite nature. The King had not quite made up his mind what to do with them, and was either waiting to consult his magistrates, or more likely working out a scheme of secret vengeance. If so, there was no time like the present for action. It remained to be seen whether escape were possible, at least it would never be more so.

A glance out of the window at the back revealed the forms of soldiers posted there also. Tony recognised one as Monsieur de Palaine, and shook his fist at him. The basement of the house was therefore too well guarded for escape in that direction, even if they should succeed in forcing the door open. There was, however, one other vent at least; namely, along the roofs to where twenty yards distant the street terminated in the river.

Tony therefore now anxiously scanned the upper part of the room which sloped upwards to

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the ridge tree. It was composed of whitewashed rafters at regular intervals, the interstices being covered with thin worm-eaten boarding, above which was the thatch. A few strokes of the dagger would suffice to make an aperture wide enough to admit a man's body, and Tony drew blade to commence the operation. Then it occurred to him that it would be impossible to crawl far from roof to roof before being discovered. Indeed, their first appearance on the thatch was like to be the signal for a discharge of bolts and arrows. If only the sun could be darkened by some means for a few precious moments! Stay, why not? The thatch could be fired, and smoke would supply an excellent cloak to their movements.

Tony had his steel and tinder at work in a moment, then an objection to this plan stopped him, and he put them down. Even if he was able to raise sufficient smoke to conceal their actions it would betray, not to say attract attention to, what they were about. Tony felt that he was at the end of his resources, and looked at Roger for an inspiration. Now, that individual had guessed what had been passing through his brother's mind from his movements. He, too, had come to the conclusion that to go up or down would only be to invite capture, and naturally turned his thoughts to

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the only possible course of procedure left, namely a passage to the river through room after room on their own flat. At first sight the plan seemed as bad as any that had preceded it. The noise they would be obliged to make in working holes through the party walls would betray them, and long before they got to the street-end, the foe would be there to meet them.

But fortunately the next house happened to be untenanted, and the one beyond—the last in the row, and overlooking the river—was occupied by a family whom they had once or twice befriended. Indeed, if they did but succeed in attracting the attention of this family they might employ them as allies. The head of it, a boatman, always kept his craft moored under the eaves of the house. Should he not be out in the boat they could drop from a window close beside it and row away. If it was not there at least they hoped to use the house as a temporary refuge. The only fear was lest their violent intrusion should be taken in a wrong spirit, and the alarm raised before they could explain their desperate straits. So desperate were they that this risk was worth running, and Roger briefly explained his scheme to the others.

Tony met it with a hearty approval, and began to look out for the best spot at which to cut an

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aperture. The lower portion of the partition wall was built of bricks, but just under the ridge the space had been filled in with stucco. Into this soft material Tony drove his dagger, whilst Roger and Ralph trolled out an English drinking ditty, not because the plan had raised their spirits, but for the sake of drowning the noise of their brother's work. Presently Tony passed through the opening he had succeeded in making and was at work on the next partition. His brothers, as preconcerted, remained where they were, singing and showing themselves at the window. But they had less heart than ever for making melody now that the critical moment had arrived to test the practicability of the plan.

Tony could be heard digging away at the final partition, and the brothers were listening for his summons to them to follow, when the sight of the boatman's wife down in the street talking earnestly with the soldiers greatly startled them. As soon as she began to point up at the houses and the enemy to run in the direction she was pointing, Roger and Ralph believed it was high time to make a bolt for life, and with a warning cry to their brother, the heavier man dashed to the door to burst it open, whilst the less powerful one held himself in readiness to spring downstairs in his wake. Though

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Ralph was exerting the force of a battering-ram it seemed ages to Roger before the fastenings of the door yielded, and he passed the time in setting light to the roof, hoping that the sight of the burning thatch might divert some of the enemy from their watchposts about the vents of escape actually in use by him and his brothers.

Maybe it did, for either from this cause or another the pair succeeded in reaching the street without a struggle. Had they been less precipitate they would have found no reason for making the attempt. Moreover they were no better off standing at bay on the threshold of the house than they would have been upstairs. Worse off, in fact, very shortly, for one of the guards stationed at the back of the house ran through to the front, and before Roger could turn round clasped him by the waist and threw him. The best that Ralph could now do was to prevent his brother's complete capture, and bestriding the struggling pair he struck out right and left with a stout oaken stool which he had picked up on his way down.

Meanwhile Tony, on hearing Roger's signal of alarm, had looked out of the window a little more carefully than his brother, thus discovering what Roger had failed to do, namely, that the woman was pointing up instead of down the street, and

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thus putting the king's men on a wrong scent. Without a suspicion of the disaster that was befalling his brothers in the rear he shouted to them that the way was clear, and scrambled through the wall into the room of the riverside house. He did not wait for them to follow, but opened the window overlooking the stream and put out his head.

His friend the boatman was laying on his oars exactly underneath and greeted him with an encouraging nod. Tony acknowledged it in an abstracted manner; he was trying to understand the sounds of fighting in the street, as well as the hissing of the smouldering thatch overhead. Though out of sight of both occurrences he formed a fairly accurate opinion of what his brothers had been about, and though feeling sure that they must be hard put to it, hesitated to run back to their assistance. His evil genius had got hold of him and whispered such ideas into his heart as the following:

"See! yonder is the Hôtel de Clugny. It will be so easy for you to reach it. The smoke already forms a screen between you and the foe. Jump down into the boat and let the man row you a few rods down stream, then out with you and run into the Queen's household before her guards have time to complete the capture of your foolish brothers and

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get back to their posts. Your life is dedicated to Mary whom you may yet save; it is not your own to throw away on others whom you cannot possibly save. Come, be quick or it will be too late."

Poor Tony! the idea of seeing the White Queen, if only once before he perished, was passing sweet. But he put it from him, called softly to the boatman to wait a while, and scrambled back to his lodging by the same way he had left it. The thatch was damp, and instead of blazing out into a bright flame emitted a good deal of smoke. The rooms were full of it, and he had to rush and open the window to escape suffocation. Then he learned that he had come back on the scenes in the nick of time.

The mighty Ralph still bestrode the pair of interlocked forms on the threshold. Tony rejoiced to see that neither of his brothers was damaged so far, and that Ralph seemed more in his element than he had been in the brawl of the night before. This was accounted for by his possessing a weapon as much to his liking as the rapier had been the reverse. The oaken stool had come in serviceably both as a buckler and a cudgel, to judge from the dented head-piece of a man lying dead or stunned in the kennel, and the broken halberds of one or two others. Tony did not suppose that the pair

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below owed their immunity from harm entirely to their own prowess. His eye had fallen on Monsieur de Palaine, who stood well out of reach of that brandished stool and kept calling on his men to take the rogues alive. That was just what they were too pusillanimous to effect, yet if this officer had wanted to put an end to all resistance the means were there. Several bowmen and arquebusiers, instead of shooting down their prey, stood idly cursing them at a safe distance. Tony felt sure that de Palaine had restrained them from using these weapons, not out of any tender considerations for his brothers, but because he would be exceeding his instructions if he harmed them. Indeed the fellow soon showed that he was well content to leave matters at this deadlock until somebody came to relieve him of his responsibilities. He began to draw off his men and form them in a semi-circle about his prey, then took to casting anxious looks up and down the street.

"So, so!" soliloquised Tony, "if the tactics of the other side are to play a waiting game we must force it," and he was about to leave the window and struggle through the smoke to his brothers when a loud cheer from up the street caught his ear. He leaned out of the window, regardless if he were observed, and beheld the approach of a magnificent

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cavalcade. From his position he could see that it consisted of several hundred horsemen all in gala costume, and as they came nearer Tony recognised the King in the foremost. Surely approaching doom never took a more beauteous shape! For Tony knew that the spectacle was death to him and his brothers, yet like a wretch in the claws of a tiger, he fell under the spell of admiration for his destroyer. The rabble that the fight in the street had collected took up the cheering, and then made an avenue for the illustrious riders to pass. When Francis came close to the burning roof and beheld the commotion under the eaves he drew rein and signed to the escort to do likewise. There followed a hush, broken only by the music of champed bits and jingling chains.

The King's eye travelled swiftly round. It fell on the halberdiers, then on Ralph and Roger, lastly on Tony. There it rested, as did every other eye in the street. Francis's lips expanded into a cynical smile, and with mocking politeness he doffed hat and swept his victim a bow. Tony's head was bare in a trice and his chin in the air. He knew he was under the gaze of three hundred nobles of France and determined to show them how an Englishman met his fate.

There was that in the surroundings of this

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ill-assorted pair which harmonised with their thoughts. Flames raged on all sides of Tony, and rage flamed within him. Smoke blackened and clouded his exterior, and his heart was clouded with black despair. The King's proud and gay bearing corresponded equally well with his feelings. The White Queen's last champion was at his mercy. The game had lapsed entirely into his hands. How would he play it ?

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CHAPTER XII

LE ROY CHEVALIER

How would he play the game? First to discover the spirit in which he entered upon it, and to do this we must hark back to an earlier hour of the morning. The sun had found less difficulty in arousing Francis than in the case of the brothers. He had grown restless long before dawn, had awoke with a weight on his mind, the desire to be rid of which had brought him out of bed earlier than usual. He was a vain youth, and according to habit went first to the looking-glass and examined his large oval face. What he saw on this occasion did not please him. His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks sallow. There was a sheepish expression about the portrait in the glass which he resented. It seemed to be ashamed of him, and when he curled his lip at the notion it did the same. He was taken with the conceit of dissociating himself from that insulting face opposite.

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"Aye," quoth he, addressing it, "you are the Francis of last night; I am well aware of that. But I'm another Francis altogether, and have to set right the mischief you did last night; do you hear?"

The face in the glass looked askance at him as if doubting his capabilities of accomplishing what he said.

"Oh, yes! I mean it," he persisted and smiled reassuringly, whereon his reflection seemed to cheer up.

"Now for it," he muttered. First he determined to dispense with the ordinary attendance of his chamberlains and pages, so calling out to them to go, he set to at his ablutions, and slushed and rubbed until he brought a little colour back to his cheeks—a second visit to the mirror showed him as much. Then he sat down and began to get into his trunk hose, pondering the while over all the difficulties he had set himself.

"How am I to commence?" wondered he. "But I suppose others will do that for me. The story will be all over Paris by now, and there will be no end to the number of meddlers in my affairs. My mother and Claude will be here shortly to scold me. Well, I suppose I shall have to eat humble pie. Pretty Mary's displeasure will be less of a penance

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to listen to. Of course she will be very indignant at first, but if I go in state and sue for pardon on bended knee it will be a case of *iræ amantium* I doubt not. She is too fond of me to bear a grudge for what, after all, was truth forced out by wine. Belike these English prudes cannot understand our French art of Love. I ought to have prepared for the assault on the virgin fortress with other talk than of disposing of her in marriage to Charles and the rest. Oh! Royne Blanche, you are to be won I am persuaded if wooed aright. Would that you and I were plain Mary and Francis, that a magician would wave his wand over us and spirit us away from Courts and statecraft to some rustic bower in the wilds. Then, methinks, I might do what I liked with you."

He pictured himself in some such position, untrammelled by ties, matrimonial and political, free if he liked to wed the White Queen. Would he under such circumstances be capable of *la grande passion?* Had he any faithful conception of what it involved? That little girl with the mournful eyes, who, in a moment of unlucky inspiration, they had christened Lœtitia, could tell him no doubt. Tony Brandon could too. Either would die cheerfully in Love's cause. Francis felt powerless to rise to such heights of self-abnegation. Was it because he had

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not yet met the right woman? Claude? pshaw, all his *mariage de convenance* could arouse in him was a chivalrous politeness. Mary? she was a delightful toy, but he could not associate her light nature with anything so solemn as the grand passion. Like himself he believed her heart-whole as yet. But this Lettice, who had darted in among the sword blades last night, she understood love in its most dismal form, and what misery it had brought upon her! Perhaps misery was essential to *la grande passion*. Philosophers had told him that ecstasy of all descriptions could be attained only through suffering. He envied the girl her powers of enjoyment and endurance, contrasting unfavourably his own frivolous nature with hers.

Higher aspirations followed. If he could not be her equal in that characteristic he was at least as generous. Was he not now the first knight in France? Might he not, if he chose, become the mirror of chivalry to all Christendom? These English had seen only the worst side of him, they should now behold the best. He would enjoy nothing better than to play the *deus ex machinâ* to Lettice and Tony Brandon. He must play it, as he did everything he took up, with mystery. The idea of bringing these two hearts together and effecting their union grew upon him. He had left them

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desperate at the thought of his coming vengeance. Now for some *coup de théâtre* which should be as gratifying as it was startling.

Here he was interrupted by a tap at the door. As was the custom any despatch arriving during the night was passed into him whilst dressing. This one was superscribed "haste, haste, haste", and sealed with the Royal Arms of England. There had been a time when communications from that source were received with misgivings as generally proving the harbingers of war. Even now when, thanks to the woman whom he had insulted twelve hours ago, more friendly relations existed 'twixt the two realms, Francis cut the missive open with a frown and mastered its contents with a quickened pulse. It informed him that Suffolk was on his way to Paris accredited by Henry with the mission of negotiating for the disposal of Mary's hand and dowry. Well might Francis feel annoyed. Apart from his designs on the White Queen and her treasure he could ill stomach the idea of his rival meddling in her affairs, and at once formed the resolution to make another bold bid for her favours before the fresh claimant could put in an appearance. Yes, this visit, already decided upon, should end his doubts as to whether she preferred Suffolk or himself once and for always.

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Another knock at the door, this time to inform him that the Provost awaited an audience. What on earth had he come to tell him? He had him up and found that this, the dreadest functionary of French justice, wanted to learn his wishes about Wilfred Brandon. Now Francis had clean forgotten that episode in the night's performances. "Ordered him to the Fin d'Aise of the Grand Châtelet—why so I did!" he muttered to himself. "Well, the knave shall cool his heels there a little longer. He's a man of quite another kidney to his open-hearted cousin, and should be dealt with in quite another fashion." Having dismissed the magistrate with injunctions to this effect, Francis was about to proceed down to breakfast when yet another interruption occurred. This time it was the head officer of the guard at the Hôtel De Clugny who craved speech of him. He, too, was shown up to the Royal bedchamber, and with soldierlike brevity reported the information that his subordinate, de Palaine, had given him as soon as they had encountered one another that morning. If Mary really had, as it seemed, countenanced Tony's desperate proposal of absconding from the French capital she must be indeed alarmed, thought Francis, and pulled a long face; on observing which the watchful underling was feign to reassure him.

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"Your Highness need have no fears that this mad project will carry through," said he, "I undertook the responsibility of setting a watch on these Englishmen before bringing you the news. They cannot stir out of their lodging until your orders arrive as to their disposal."

"Don't be too sure of that," said the King dryly. "I know these brothers better than you do. Moreover, don't count on any orders from me. I have no quarrel with the gentles."

"No quarrel, Sire?" asked the man, hardly believing his ears.

"With them, no; with you, yes, should your officiousness lead to their scathe."

"I will return at once and take off my men," suggested the disappointed officer.

"No, leave them there till I arrive to explain the mistake," and Francis's face cleared as the idea struck him of having no little diversion out of the occurrence. Dismissing the Swiss, he repaired once more to the glass and nodded repeatedly at his image. Quite as energetic were its gestures of acquiescence. "Ah, now we understand one another," exclaimed the delighted King.

Once more, however, he pulled a long face; he was on the point of joining Madame, his wife, at the breakfast table. But if he anticipated an

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unpleasant scene downstairs with her he was destined to an agreeable disappointment. Poor gentle matron! she never got the best of these conjugal jars, and was showing her resentment at last night's folly by breakfasting alone. Before Francis touched a morsel of food he gave orders for the visit in state to the Clugny. All the witnesses of his last expedition there were to accompany him, and many besides of equally noble blood. Publicity was to be a feature of his atonement for the drunken freak. He was soon in the saddle and led his followers over the Seine, then took the route to the Hôtel de Clugny, which passed through the street in which the brothers lay. Before he reached it some inkling of the violent scene in store was afforded him by the sight of smoke hovering over the district, and when one of his nearest companions called his attention to it his reply was, "Aye, my good friends the Messieurs Brandon are as usual alert and active."

This was passed on from rider to rider until the whole cavalcade fell into a state of expectancy. When their master made his bow to the Englishman at the window as already related, every eye was upturned at Tony's smoke-begrimed visage, and when they beheld his defiance they believed

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him lost. But that was not the way in which Francis intended to play the game.

"Master Brandon," said he blandly, "I wish to have a word with you, and as I am not dressed for encountering fire and smoke I crave the courtesy of your coming to meet me out here."

Even then Tony might have escaped to the river, but he had long since made up his mind to share the same fate as his brothers, so presently he came coughing and choking out into the open, marched up to Francis and tendered his sword.

The King jerked out a laugh. "This time," said he, "the hilt is towards me I see; generally it has been the other end. But I decline either, so put it up."

"Then — then —" stammered the astounded Tony.

"Ah, you begin to see I am not here to demand your sword either point or hilt. I hope I shall never have to. All I demand is to sup with you to-night."

He said it loud enough for the bystanders to hear, and a whisper of surprise travelled round. But this was nothing to the surprise the words brought upon the brothers' faces.

"To sup with us?" echoed Tony blankly.

"That is to say if the reception you may be

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good enough to give me be not too hot. I am not like my emblem the salamander accustomed to feed on fire. Is it not time to be putting some of this out?"

"I hardly yet understand your grace."

"I will try to make my meaning more intelligible this evening. But what about the hour?"

"We usually sup at five."

"At five then I shall present myself alone. I doubt not I shall have a merry evening. Till then adieu, Messieurs Brandon," and the King rode on with his people to the Hôtel de Clugny.

Of the audience with Mary that followed, history has little to relate, save about that portion of it which was public. Francis pleaded for a private interview and was accorded it. He was humble and penitent, Mary gracious and forgiving; neither at all genuine in all they protested. The news of Suffolk's approach had come to Mary as well as Francis, and raised a barrier of deception between them. The White Queen was busy reweaving the web which she considered her unconcealed disgust for Francis of the night before had necessitated. Any moment her lover might set foot in the dominions of his rival, and it had become more essential than ever to relieve the latter's mind of all jealousy of the former. So the White Queen

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had been never so encouraging to her admirer, and he, just because of Suffolk's near approach, never so disposed to be encouraged. The result was the tenderest passage that had yet occurred between them. Francis vowed he would give up all for her love, and went off with the idea that he had not only absolved his offence but that it had opened Mary's eyes at last to the reckless lengths he was disposed to go in winning her. In fine he flattered himself on having stolen such a march on Suffolk as would leave him hopelessly in the rear until he had tired of this new plaything.

He had now nothing to take his mind off his plans about Tony and Lettice. At supper that evening he meant to pave the way to an act of benevolence which should live in their memories long after the recollection of other acts of his had vanished. There also he was over sanguine. He had too long posed as their inveterate foe to be able so suddenly to assure them he was their well-wisher.

The time drew on and at the appointed hour he presented himself at the brothers' lodgings. That he had been expected was patent from their landlady's demeanour when opening the door to admit him. He had disguised himself in an old cloak with a collar high enough to cover his face.

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This notwithstanding, the woman at once welcomed him as "Sire," curtseying low and ushering him upstairs with all the simple homage of her class. If he had any further doubts of being expected they were removed by the sight of the preparations made for him. The ravages of the fire had been adroitly concealed by awnings and hangings of bright hues, the brothers' rooms fresh strewn with rushes, the table laid with covers for four, and wine on a sideboard to satisfy double that number of *bon vivants*.

But where could the three hosts be? The woman was downstairs engaged in dishing up, so Francis set about inquiring for himself. The draught behind him took him first in that direction. He drew aside the hangings and discovered the hole made by the brothers in the morning's attempt to escape. Then he took a candle and explored the space beyond, saw it was the room of the next house which both looked and smelled so uninvitingly that he gave up the idea of searching for the truants any further in that direction. Moreover just at the moment he heard the woman bringing up the first course, and this afforded him the opportunity to find out if she could throw any light on her lodgers' absence. He used such homely language to her that she lost some of her

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awe of him and became communicative. "They were queer folk, these Englishmen," said she, "gave her a lot of trouble, had half tumbled her dwelling about her ears that very morning, and then paid royally for the damage. No knowing what delayed them, unless another brawl. They had gone in and out most of the day purchasing delicacies for the feast, the last occasion being two hours since. Perhaps this time they had found it more difficult to procure what they wanted, but unless they had got into fresh mischief they could not be long now. Would his Grace begin before they arrived?"

Francis opined that he would, hoping that his hosts might take the liberty in the light of a reproach on their want of punctuality. Setting his knife into a pasty he found it to his taste, except for being a trifle more highly flavoured than he had been accustomed to, and soon satisfied the cravings of his stomach. He began now more than ever to feel the want of convives, got up and entered his hosts' bedchamber; whereon he made a discovery. Their belongings—dress, bedclothes and valises—were gone as well as themselves, and it then dawned upon him that they were not coming back at all. The knowledge that their absence was not accidental but premeditated incensed him.

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Distrust had been the motive, of course, and though himself to blame for it he made no excuse on that account. With his mind dwelling only on the unmerited repulse which his good-nature and unprecedented condescension had received, he got up vowing he had never been so insulted in his life, and wrapping his mantle once more about his face strode downstairs in a very ugly mood and so home to his palace.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE KING ATTEMPTS A SECOND MOVE IN THE GAME

FIVE minutes after the King left the room the hanging against the party-wall was cautiously put aside and Tony leaped lightly down, ran to the door and locked it. He stood listening there until he heard a low whistle from the street, whereon he took a candle and showed himself at the window. A moment later Roger followed by Ralph burst into the room. "All's well!" said Roger eyeing the food hungrily.

"Yes, but all was nearly ending ill," said Tony. "He began poking his nose into everything, fetched a light to my hiding-place, and looked for a moment as if he meant coming in. Marry! I had my dagger ready if he had."

"We counted no less than six of his cut-throats in the street," remarked Roger. "Lucky you made us take those precautions, Tony."

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"Aye, we should have been caught like rats in a trap if we had sat down to supper with the false fellow," and the speaker sank wearily into a chair and poured himself out a cup of wine.

Certainly Francis, if he had overheard all this, would not have understood it. The fact is that neither the brothers' conduct nor his was so mean as each party believed. True, the brothers had doubted this sudden graciousness of his. But until they had made sure that they had grounds for so doing they were prepared to meet their self-invited guest at table. Not that the incident lent itself to their liking: they were still set on rescuing Mary from his offensive attentions, and with their thoughts full of this, to feast the adversary appeared an underhand business. However, they got the better of the objection by regarding it in the light of a short truce such as the most inveterate adversaries often patched up; moreover a truce proposed by the other side and hardly to be declined by theirs with impunity. But, like all compacts of the kind, it would have to be hedged round with precautions and rendered subject to conditions. Francis had promised to keep the appointment unattended; his doing so would be the best proof of his *bonâ fides;* and they determined to make sure of his being alone before they presented themselves at table. So

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distrustful were they as yet of him that they were quite as careful to prepare for an act of treachery on his part as for the act of hospitality on their own. Measures for the former Tony took upon himself, those for the latter he left to Ralph and Roger. Their first care was to pack and remove their belongings to their friend's, the boatman's, domicile. Then whilst his brothers went to and fro buying the materials for the banquet, Tony repaired to the Hôtel de Clugny to concert final arrangements with the Queen for her flight. Hostilities, you understand, were not to be suspended until the moment of sitting down to sup with the foe. Tony's visit to the Clugny did not promise to be one of danger or even difficulty. So public had been the friendly overtures of Francis in the morning that he expected the guards at the Hôtel to receive him with a respect due to one whom kings delight to honour. Nor was he disappointed, for, on presenting himself at the gates and stating his errand, the officer there delayed only to tender him a courteous apology for his mistake of the morning, before hurrying off to see if Mary would receive him, and these good offices were all the more acceptable because no Lettice was at hand to tender Tony hers as an alternative. Of course Mary would see him, and presently he found himself once more in the chamber

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of the White Queen. Tony, I promise you, made the best of his opportunity, lest it should be the last of gaining the Queen's ear. It was fortunate that he arrived soon after her audience with the King, and so caught her at a moment when she was experiencing a revulsion of feeling against this importunate admirer. She told her faithful champion of Suffolk's expected embassage, and hailed with joy the idea of stealing off to meet him. No risks were too formidable for her to run now, because Suffolk's life might be saved, her lasting happiness ensured by the romantic venture.

Tony did not stay longer than he could help. Merely obtaining from her the promise to be ready for flight at short notice he sped off to prepare the means, for which, knowing how costly they might be, Mary had furnished him with plenty of gold. Fortune still was kind, and two hours before the hour appointed for the banquet he was back at his lodgings, having hired or bought all he required. He would have been less easy in his mind had he known that his steps had been dogged from place to place by Monsieur de Palaine of the Cent Gardes. Far from suspecting this, Tony now considered his prospects of succouring his beloved mistress so rosy that he was more than ever determined to keep out of any possible trap. "See here, lads," he said,

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beginning at once to school his brothers in the parts he intended them to play that evening, "if Francis comes alone, well and good. We will take our places at table. But we must first be sure that he is alone. Remember the scene at the Auberge des Bucherons! A fine look out for us if whilst we sit carousing with him upstairs his *gendarmes* are posted outside awaiting his signal to rush in upon us."

So it was arranged that Tony should ensconce himself in the empty house next door and observe the King's attitude when he arrived, whilst the other two remained alert in the street to see if there were any suspicious gallants hanging about. A cough was to be the signal, at which all three were to decamp in their friend's boat which he had promised to have ready moored at a convenient spot. If, on the other hand, nobody could he perceived in the street a low whistle would bring Tony there, and then all three would repair upstairs, tender an apology to their guest for their unpunctuality, and set to and entertain him to the best of their ability. This doubtless is what would have happened had not the King's friends been over-zealous for his safety. They had listened with misgivings to his proposal of the morning to sup with these Englishmen. It was like their master to believe everybody

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as magnanimous as himself. What if these Brandons took advantage of his defenceless position as their guest to revenge themselves upon him for the business of the past night? They were desperate fellows from all accounts, and seemed to stop at nothing when once they had made up their minds to a reckless undertaking. In short, the King's people believed he was about to do a very unwise action, and determined to see him safely through with it. Thus, unbeknown to Francis, some half-dozen of his courtiers followed him secretly to the scene of the revel, and posted themselves at convenient coigns of vantage until he reappeared in the street. Then, as soon as he had got clear of them on his homeward route, they dispersed to their own quarters. Thus had the King's benevolent intrigue miscarried and, never learning the real reason, he failed to find any adequate excuse for the brothers' discourteous response to his condescension.

That the mistake did not lead to worse consequences than it did was owing to Lettice. It will be remembered that she had not been about when Tony paid his visit to the Queen. She was, in fact, too shaken both in body and mind to leave her bed the day after the quarrel. But the second morning, she was well enough to put into execution a

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plan she had made up her mind to whilst lying idle. Once before her interposition in her lover's favour had decided Francis to spare him, why not again? At any rate she would make the attempt, and without taking counsel of anybody she walked off to the Royal Palace.

When Francis heard who it was that sought an audience with him, he smiled in a less cynical fashion than usual. Have her up he certainly would, if only to study afresh this expositor of the art of serious love-making. And besides, the girl was the only member of the English party who had never run counter to his whims and aims.

A melting scene took place between the pair. Lettice at first could do nothing but cry, and Francis was seldom proof against a woman's tears.

"Mademoiselle," he exclaimed, "must I ever make you wretched?"

"Oh! Sire, my lover—my brother," sobbed the girl.

"Well, and if I forgive Anthony Brandon, will you be any the better?"

"Surely, Sire."

"But I did so before, and how did he repay you? Let your sad little face be my answer. It is you, Mademoiselle, I would serve. *Foi de gentilhomme!* I mean it."

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"And, Sire, you will have done all you can possibly do for me if you forgive my Tony."

"Maybe you do not know that I have already proffered forgiveness, and it has been declined."

"He must have misunderstood you, Sire. I cannot believe him ungrateful."

"Faith! if you cannot I ought not. At least I will overlook the slight. Now for your well being, Mademoiselle. I don't ask you to credit Kings with omnipotence. All I ask is, put your trust in this King standing here. It is contrary to Holy Writ, I know. Yet do not exceptions prove the rule?"

"Oh, Sire, I believe you wish me well."

"But not that I can work you well. Nevertheless wait and see."

"And Tony?"

"Will have to wait too."

"Wilfred?"

"Shall be restored to you this very day."

"Sire, I can never repay these kindnesses."

"They require no repayment, fair lady. But you and I shall meet again. Now dry those pretty eyes I implore."

Thus they parted, whereon the King touched a hand-bell, and another person was shown into the presence.

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It was our old acquaintance the amorous Monsieur de Palaine. He had come to impart the fruits of the previous day's espionage, and it was not by any means the first time the Swiss archer had been there in the guise of a mouchard.

Now though, as has been already shown, Francis usually found that his best agents were those who served him out of mingled fear and gratitude, and the one in question for a while had only confirmed him in this principle, lately he had had reasons to suspect that other motives were influencing him, and since his superior officer had reported his remiss behaviour on the night of the famous scene at the Hôtel de Clugny, he had become certified of the fact. He therefore received de Palaine's account of Tony's doings on the previous afternoon with none of his usual graciousness, but made it the peg on which to hang a warning.

"See here, Monsieur de Palaine, I have found you a zealous tool whenever you hit upon something bad to tell me about this Anthony Brandon, and I begin to suspect a motive for this which does not please me. You are jealous of the man, and that points to your being still half in love with his sweetheart. The one sentiment may lead to the undoing of all the good the other accomplishes. As I had occasion to say on first employing you,

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spies of mine must sink all sentiment so as to be ready if I require it to work injury to their friends as well as benefits to their foes."

"To serve the King in any shape is and has always been my highest aim, Sire," asseverated the now trembling officer.

"Your affection for him of course transcends that for everybody else. Come, man, don't treat me like a fool."

"Our Lady forbid!" exclaimed the frightened wretch.

"Our Lady protect you from my vengeance, if you fail me a third time!"

"A third time, Sire?" asked Monsieur de Palaine.

"Aye, once at the Hôtel Gruthuse, again at the Clugny makes twice. The third we will not even presuppose, because you don't desire to commit suicide I hope."

"If your Highness will only try me again I—I——"

"There, no protestations! I mean to try you again. Open the door of that wardrobe and see if you can crouch down there a few moments? Good! now keep still for your life," and Francis once more touched the bell.

"Show the prisoner up," said he to the usher

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who came to see what was wanted, and presently Wilfred Brandon was brought in between two men of the Provost's Guard.

"Retire," said the King to the latter, and when they had obeyed he stood a while confronting his victim. On observing his twitching mouth and palsied limbs, a grim smile passed over the King's countenance.

"You thought it was all over with you, my friend, this time, is it not so? The Fin d'Aise is especially reserved for faithless spies," he seemed to address the remark to the wardrobe. "Tell me, how did you feel?"

"Oh God!" shuddered Wilfred, and the ejaculation must have expressed more than the longest and minutest account of his sufferings would have done to judge from its effect on the other spy. The wardrobe seemed seized with a fit of the ague.

"Enough," said Francis hastily. "I will take it that you will be more careful in future. So listen to my instructions. His Grace of Suffolk is on his way here with a mission of State to La Royne Blanche. Needless to say I am not disposed to let him have a free hand with her. Neither are you, I should surmise?" Wilfred bowed and the King went on. "I want to learn what the Queen means to do when she meets the

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Duke. That is one thing you will have to discover for me. The rest of your duties are the same as before, with this difference: your cousins have absconded, you must put yourself in communication with them."

"It may prove impossible," objected Wilfred.

"It shall not prove so. I will see that you receive sufficient information to act upon. Now go back to the Hôtel de Clugny."

They parted without a courtesy on either side, and the moment the door had closed on the Englishman Francis called the Cent Garde out of the wardrobe.

"Did you recognise that man by his voice?" he asked.

"Yes surely, Sire," assented the other.

"Well, then, henceforth leave the sister alone and pay your attentions to the brother. Watch him night and day, and bring me word what he does, even what he thinks, if you are clever enough. Fail me and you shall take his place in the Fin d'Aise. Now away with you."

Hardly a day elapsed before both men were back in the same room, Wilfred first, the other an hour later.

"Your Highness," said the Englishman, "will see that I have had my hands full by the amount

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of tidings I shall impart." Francis made no comment on this preamble, merely yawned as if he expected to be little interested; and somewhat disconcerted by this cold reception, Wilfred proceeded in the tones of a person repeating a lesson learned by rote. "My cousins are living outside Paris, but occasionally come back at night to the street where they formerly lodged."

"To the house by the river side tenanted by a boatman, so much the Provost reports," added the King.

"They are busy with an idiotic plan for the Queen's escape to England, Sire."

"Which is to be put into execution on the day I leave for Rheims," read Francis from his tablets.

"Your Grace is so well posted in these matters that perhaps I need say no more," said Wilfred, taken aback by the King thus forestalling his information.

"I have irons in the fire besides you," said Francis, "but go on."

"They have twice attempted to obtain speech of the Queen."

"And failed. I gave orders to that effect."

"So I fancied, Sire. They have in consequence approached me as well as my sister to see if we would promote the project."

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"And she demurred, you declined outright. Henceforth I desire you to lend yourself to the undertaking."

"What? Oh! I see. By doing so I shall be best able to bring you the information necessary for the defeat of the plot."

"On the contrary, I want it to succeed."

"Surely it is not your wish that the Queen should escape, Sire?"

"It ought to be enough for me to say that I wish you to act on the presumption. But I will condescend to explain myself a little more clearly. If Mary agrees to run away from me I shall not prevent her starting. You are to take part in her flight, moreover the most prominent part in it. Therefore go back and assume that office at once. Arrange everything as if you were my worst foe. Nearer the day I will furnish you with fuller instructions as to your conduct on the journey."

"How shall I evade the vigilance of your catchpoles, how pass your guards at the city gates?" asked the astonished Wilfred.

"Every facility for flight will be afforded you by me in person."

"My cousins may be fools, but unless they are madmen they will before long suspect a trap in all this, Sire."

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"As they did in that supper business, true!" said the King thoughtfully; "well then, here are more plausible grounds for you to act upon. I will issue an order that all you Brandons are to leave this city within a certain date, say a month hence. You will then be able to make open preparations for your departure. I suppose your cousins purport to carry off the Queen in a horse-litter? Well, let them do so, but give out that it is your sister who requires it. Then dress up Mary in your sister's clothes. *Foi de gentilhomme!* I begin to think that were I your cousins I should be able to carry the plot through in the teeth of all my people's vigilance, and I almost wish I were for the fun it promises."

"And, if I may venture to ask, what is your actual rôle, Sire, in all this?"

"Come," said Francis, "you are not the cunning fellow I take you for if you do not guess. That you will soon do so leads me to confess it. If Mary decides to take flight it will prove that she prefers Lord Suffolk to me, won't it?"

"And you will give her up to him without a struggle, Sire?"

"No, my friend, I do not say that; and if I did, I should be afraid that you would not allow me to. Once out of the reach of the Fin d'Aise and my

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pursuit you might be induced to defy me. So I have made arrangements to be close behind you all the journey. The day you start remember I do also. I suppose your cousins chose it on that account, but did not expect that at the first night's halt I should overtake them."

"Where?"

"At a mill of mine on the Marne. See, here is a chart of your route, and there in that forest is the mill where you are to lie."

"And the miller will have orders to lodge us there?"

"Sad to relate the swain-mote hanged him some six months since for a trifle about false measures or balances. His ghost, it is locally reported, remains, and hence the spot is avoided. I daresay it will not deny you and your party a night's lodging."

"And after you arrive?"

"The Queen and I shall have some pleasant talk together."

"No violence, I hope, your Grace?"

"Silence, sir! But I don't mind saying that she shall pursue her journey on the morrow in which ever direction she chooses; that will be back to Paris."

"And then, your Grace?"

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"And then, my lord Suffolk may as well return whence he came. But enough and more than enough of such confidences. They are dangerous goods when they come from a King. Bear that in mind and now leave me."

Then came de Palaine's turn for an audience. Since there last he had been watching his fellow spy closely: of that much he soon managed to assure the King. Otherwise he had brought nothing worth listening to, and Francis sent him back with a sneer at his lack of perspicuity. Maybe it rankled and in some degree sharpened his wits, for a week later he really had something of value to impart to his employer. Wilfred Brandon, it transpired, had been in close touch with his cousins, in other words was manifestly acting in exact accordance with his instructions. It was not about that the King seemed anxious to hear.

"Never mind his actions. How about his demeanour? Does he look at his ease?" asked he.

"Hardly, Sire."

"Put out?"

"Not a bit, say rather sanguine, excited, preoccupied, like somebody on the eve of embarking on a pleasant and important business."

"Hum!" said Francis thoughtfully, "Does he write letters?"

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"One to a friend in England; an Augustine friar called 'Johannes.'"

"Hah! intercept and bring me the answer," said Francis eagerly.

A few days later he received the document, and had it carefully opened, so that after perusal it might be passed on to its proper recipient without his suspecting that it had been tampered with. Francis read it twice carefully, then, "I must have another talk with Mary," quoth he to himself with a satisfied smile. He was now in his element, an intrigue was toward which came up to his highest expectations. High they usually were in such an affair; for Francis I. was a born intriguer, and imported mystery into everything he took up, even into the prosaic business of architecture, as witness the secret rooms, sliding panels, staircases endowed with acoustic properties, and the like, in the palaces of his designing.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE FLIGHT

"My dear cousins," said Wilfred, a few days after the scene recorded in the last chapter, "I will be quite frank with you. If a second time I am to imperil my life in one of your conspiracies it must be not only as leader but as a leader who can rely to the death on his followers. Remember your conduct in the affair of the Ritter."

The speaker sat in a boat on the Seine, and the three brothers rested on their oars to listen to him.

"That's only reasonable," said Tony after a moment's thought, "but this time you must acquaint us beforehand with the whole scheme."

"I will do so at once. But keep rowing leisurely as if we were out for exercise or pleasure. Well, first of all there is to be no mystery about our departure. The King's edict expelling us from Paris obviates all necessity for that. We start in

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the daylight as near dawn as possible, because people at that hour have only half their wits about them."

"But surely in the dark the Queen would be the less likely to be recognised?" urged Tony.

"Night, on the other hand, is always the time chosen by suspicious characters to leave the city," argued Wilfred. "If we had any means of getting out other than through one of the gates there might be something to say in favour of a moonlight flitting. As it is I avoid all chance of arousing suspicion."

"We might row down the river and slip away," suggested Roger.

"Impossible! Chains are put across every night to stop boat parties. A man could scarcely swim out of Paris undetected. Besides, I tell you there is no need for heroic measures. I hope to manage that the gate-wards shall receive orders to pass us through."

"Yes, and that is just what I don't like. Their orders will come from the King, and maybe a secret one besides for us to be carefully examined in case there be somebody of the party he does not want to lose sight of just yet."

Wilfred only shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "He has so many spies. Some hint may

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have reached him of our real design," persisted Tony.

"We shall not take the direct road north but one which nobody will expect. Besides, the King is particularly busy just now with his own affairs. This journey to receive the sacred oil at Rheims preoccupies his mind."

"Well, you know best. How is the Queen bearing up? Is she still eager for flight?"

"Trust her for that. You should see her! She can hardly be still for a moment, keeps counting the days that remain, and questioning me as to the progress of the preparations."

"And, of course, you assure her that we will not fail her?"

"I do, and she does not doubt the fact. She talks more confidentially with me than ever. Her love for your lord seems to grow stronger every day."

"And Lettice," asked Tony diffidently, "is she reconciled at last to staying behind?"

"I think so; that is to say the idea that she is an important factor in the Queen's escape lessens her disappointment at not going with her. After all it is no real hardship."

"And but a passing inconvenience. Assure her, Wilfred, that somehow we will get her back to England directly the Queen is safe there."

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"I have; you need not bother your head about that."

"She understands," continued Tony with still more diffidence, "I—I would come and take my leave before starting if I dared. Even now if she could meet me somewhere unobserved——"

"She won't, she knows too well the danger that would be incurred of the miscarriage of the whole undertaking. We may drop the subject of Lettice and come to other details of the flight."

Thus reassured Tony's face cleared and at Wilfred's instigation he began to describe the form of litter he had procured, which it transpired was fitted with a leathern hood that could not become disarranged unless unfastened from inside or removed by violence, and adapted to be borne by a horse in front and behind, both of which had been carefully selected, as well as a pair of sumpter mules to carry bedding and provisions.

"Good! Now as to our respective positions on the journey," continued Wilfred. "You, Tony, must ride the foremost horse, Roger the hindmost. To Ralph, because of his being the heaviest, I allot the duty of leading the mules. I shall bring my own horse and keep alongside the Queen. Is that all satisfactory?"

"Yes!" said Ralph and Roger readily enough

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and "I suppose so," added Tony more deliberately. "But at nights?"

"Oh! at nights we shall have to take it in turns to mount guard about our lodging. The first halt will be in a deserted mill in the middle of a forest. Don't forget that the Queen is supposed to be my sister, and therefore it will be more natural for me than you to see to her wants."

"But I am the lady's bachelor," objected Tony.

"Who will know that where we are going? Come, Tony, you are not going to show jealousy of me already?"

"Of course not," said Tony reddening.

"Well, then, you now know all I can tell you for the present. So say if you decide to accept my terms? Yes! Then promise me unquestioning obedience throughout the venture." Then on receiving their asseverations to that effect, "Now put me ashore and meet me at the same time and place to-morrow, by when I hope to have the passports ready."

Their cousin disembarked and the brothers rowed back to the middle of the Seine, Ralph laying on his oar so lustily that he directed the other's attention to the unnecessary exertion.

"Hallo!" said Tony, catching sight of his expression, "what's the matter now?"

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"Nothing," said the younger brother uneasily.

"Yes there is."

"Oh! if you insist on hearing, I am only half-hearted over this business. It's no good my pretending any longer I am not, Tony."

"Why?"

"Because of Lettice being left behind."

"She will take no harm. She has become of late a great favourite of the King's," put in Roger.

"And I swear to come back for her as soon as possible," said Tony.

"And marry her?" asked Ralph anxiously.

"That is for the lady to decide."

"Oh, she will have you fast enough. You will be very good to her, Tony. All your life after, won't you, Tony? You can make it up that way, you know."

"Shame on you, Ralph, to talk like that!" said Roger, with some warmth. "Remember what we owe to Tony for coming back to our rescue the other day."

"I do! I do! Here, Tony," and Ralph stopped to shake his brother's hand.

Before the day arrived for this second kidnapping of Mary Tudor, there were the usual panics of discovery and premonitions of failure which come before most enterprises of the kind. The brothers

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went to and fro with the stealth of proscribed men, suspecting harmless passers-by for spies, and maybe bestowing never a thought on such as were really so.

But no actual casualty has to be recorded, and the fateful day was ushered in by a storm of sleet and wind. So much the better for the conspirators. It afforded an excuse for the lady of the party to come down and get into the litter with her head concealed in a travelling wimple, and Wilfred with the brusqueness of a brother soon tucked her up in her wraps and arranged the curtain so that she might the easier attach its fastenings. During this breathless moment Tony, who was already mounted, dared not trust himself to steal a glance back at his adored mistress, whilst Roger sat bolt upright in his saddle, like the soldier he was, and gazed into space over the hood of the litter. Then came the start, the postillion pair of brothers spurred their beasts, the third cracked his whip at the mules, and Wilfred sprang to horse and ranged himself beside the litter. In this order the small party passed quickly out of sight, whereon the halberdiers, who had stood watching, returned to their duties with, maybe, a muttered oath of relief on seeing the last of the Queen's English. Upstairs she might be weeping her eyes red at the event.

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But what cared they? What for that matter cared anybody in Paris? Poor English lady! even though you be only the untitled Lettice Brandon, there is nobody of your own kith and kin left to comfort you.

Meanwhile the travellers crossed the Seine, gained the Porte St. Denys, were suffered to proceed without let or hindrance, turned their beasts' heads due east, and presently Paris, its king and people, its palaces and prisons, had been left far in the rear.

And now the idiosyncracies of these Brandons came to the fore. Strange to say, Wilfred, the instrument of Francis, engaged as he was in carrying out his instructions, the only one who knew that whatever occurred he would be held blameless, was the most uneasy of the party. Far more frequently than any other, his head was over his shoulder scanning the horizon in the rear. What could he have to fear? The usually imperturbable Ralph, next to him, was the worst offender in showing signs of worry. He was allowing his mind to dwell on Lettice's position at the Hôtel de Clugny, deserted and anticipating the King's discovery of her part in the imposture. In vain he tried to comfort himself with the thought that Francis's regard for her would be proof against his

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annoyance at her treachery. If he had had nobody but himself to consider he would even now have hurried back the way he had come to brave the King's vengeance if haply he might relieve Lettice's apprehensions by his company. Naturally Roger was more light-hearted, but both he and Tony kept wondering how soon it would be before somebody insisted upon entering the chambers of the White Queen and found out the plot. Fast as the fugitives were travelling they would not be out of danger until they entered the English dominions surrounding Calais, and they could not ignore the fact that their route thither was a roundabout one. It was a cheerless day for wayfarers, and they fell in with but few. Noon came and the brothers began to wonder why Wilfred did not call a halt for refreshment. Despite their fears of pursuit they would have welcomed the order, Tony in particular, because he had begun to feel for the delicate lady shut up in that litter without a soul to speak to. Yet the fact that Wilfred still pressed on was proof that he felt the need of so doing. The brothers, true to their promise, allowed him full freedom of action.

The day drew to its close and still the cry was onward. Night overtook them as they neared the forest, in a purlieu of which lay the deserted mill.

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Without drawing rein Wilfred began to refer to his chart, and presently struck out along a grassy ride furrowed by the wheels of timber wains. As the hours went slowly by, this man, so far from getting over his anxiety, seemed to surrender himself more and more to its tyranny, and in some measure his companions took the infection. Faces were turned almost as often in the direction they had been coming as towards that in which they were going. At every unusual sound somebody or other abjured his fellows to pull up to hearken. Now it was that voice of the night—the heron's, anon the howl of a wolf, or the scamper of deer. There was nobody to stop and ask the way of if they had wanted to do so. Such few agisters and woodcutters as lived in this sylvan world were a-bed, and but for the barking of a dog now and then they would have passed by their huts without noticing them. Soon they fell in with a river and followed its course about a mile or so, when it brought them to an open space in the trees, where it divided into two channels. An indistinct object, angular in form, spanned the nearest, and soon discerning that it was the mill, they shook up their horses and came on at a trot. It looked a gloomy, even forbidding, erection in the darkness, and yet, as the goal of a long, anxious journey, they hailed the sight with

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glee. It stood on an island formed on their side by the mill-waste, on the other by the race. A bridge of planks had to be crossed, and Wilfred, dismounting, first tested its strength and then coaxed his horse over. The rest of the beasts followed readily enough, and the weary party found themselves in a small triangular yard bounded by the mill and its accessories.

Before any one could leave the saddle, Wilfred was beside the litter and helping out its occupant. Indeed so cramped was she with cold and inertion hat she had to be carried into the house. No need to knock or even open. Maybe the door had been stolen for firewood, at all events it was not there. Meanwhile, obedient to orders, the brothers unloaded the animals and saw to their wants—no easy job in the darkness, as well as one not to be scamped unless they wanted these useful allies to fail them in the morrow's flight. But before they had done with them, Wilfred was back clamouring for a light. The Queen, he told them, was frightened of the dark, and in sooth the traditions of the place were enough to excite the feeling. So they had to leave that task awhile to unstrap and search package after package for tapers and lanterns. Altogether it was a good half-hour before they became at liberty to join

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their companions inside; upon which they discovered their fair charge to have retired to a separate apartment, and their cousin kneeling before a fire he had just kindled in the kitchen, and making a pair of bellows of his cheeks. But at the sound of their footsteps he leaped up looking scared.

"Oh! it's only you, is it?" he cried. "I thought—— But all three of you? This will not do at all," and singling out Ralph, perhaps because he was the best-natured, he prevailed upon him to go back to the yard and remain on guard there by promising to come and relieve him as soon as he had swallowed some food.

Now the giant had done all the walking that day, and was not only hungry like the rest but leg-weary and footsore. So as soon as he got outside again, he seated himself in the fork of an ivy-tree which had climbed as high as the mill roof. What with the darkness and its projecting foliage when somebody opened either a window or a door close by he was not observed. There was nothing in the occurrence to disturb him and he did not stir. It was either the Queen or Wilfred, he felt sure, trying to explore the surroundings. But on hearing the treble tones of a woman beseeching God to help her to realise His near presence, Ralph

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immediately jumped up and showed himself. Maybe he hoped that *his* near presence would suffice her; maybe he had some other reason, because when she slammed the door to as if she were frightened or annoyed by the attention, he did not look repentant nor yet surprised. Quite the contrary, for over his homely face stole a grin which grew and grew until he exploded into a fit of silent laughter. For a person in his circumstances this was surely a strange ebullition of feeling. But the Queen's actions had more astounding effects on him still. They apparently made him forget his duties, for he sheathed his sword, and strolled into the house as if he no longer cared whether he and his friends were overtaken and surprised.

They, however, did not share his indifference, and when he joined them in the kitchen Wilfred started up from the rude erection which served for a supper-table and asked anxiously if he had anything serious to report.

"Not he, he was only sick of his own company," he replied, "and for his part saw no necessity to catch his death of cold out there. If anybody believed it possible that they could be tracked all this distance he was the best man to play the sentinel."

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"That is not keeping to our compact," growled Wilfred, as he hastily collected a few portable bits of food and began to wrap his cloak about him preparatory to taking the deserted post. "Now," said he, "as I have mentioned already, the Queen has got a fit of the tremors and protests she cannot sleep out of hearing of any one else. So I have promised her that somebody shall sit up in the loft overhead to keep her company. You brothers had better cast lots as to which is to take the first turn of watching. Tony soon had three pieces of paper of unequal lengths ready for the purpose, Ralph meanwhile, in spite of his weariness, making great inroads into a cold joint. It was quite as well for him that he used this expedition, because the lot fell to him to take the first turn above, and Wilfred at once led him up to the position. They passed up a well staircase and reached the one spacious bedroom of the mill. But Wilfred did not stop there, and turned into the working portion, Ralph following in wonder why their frail charge had preferred to bed in so uncomfortable a position. By the light in Wilfred's hand he could see that they were now on the grindstone floor over which was the garner storey, and under it the basement. It was in the latter, Wilfred explained, the Queen had chosen to lie.

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Telling him therefore to dispose his bedding wherever he liked, and strictly forbidding him to address the Queen unless she spoke first, Wilfred said "Good-night," and bearing off the candle departed to his own post of watchfulness outside.

Ralph would now have been in total darkness but for certain beams of light which penetrated the boards from the apartment below. He listened and heard the rustle of a woman's clothing underfoot, and thus divined the exact position of his gentle companion. During the brief view he had had of his own surroundings he had noticed the great grindstones, the wooden driving wheels with their leathern belting still in gear, and the floor littered with the hempen wreckage of a sack hoist. Besides these objects a more important one had caught his eye. It was a trap-door communicating with the floor below. He wanted to be sure that at a pinch his timid charge could reach him, and he at once groped his way to the trap-door and felt with his hands for any fastening which at a moment's notice he might detach. Finding none he came to the conclusion that it could only be opened from below. All that remained for him to do was to dispose his bedding as close as possible to the spot without encroaching upon it. This he accomplished and sat down. He had no mind to

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sleep until he heard all still underneath, and could not take his thoughts off the poor lady's comfortless position in the basement. No wonder she was restless; no wonder she felt timid! Even from where he was the fierce swirl of the waste was audible. To her beneath, separated by only a few inches of planking from it, the furious water would seem as if it were fighting to break in and devour her. Whilst casting about in his mind for the means to reassure her, he heard her telling her beads, upon which he began to repeat his Paternoster and Credo, in the hope that she might be impressed with the sense of his fellowship and sympathy. That it had the desired effect seemed probable, for he heard her climb up something like a ladder to the trap-door and finish her orisons there.

Encouraged by this he was tempted to address her, but managed to resist the forbidden pleasure until he heard her utter a startled exclamation, and the ladder rattled as if she were taken with another fit of the tremors. He knew in an instant that it was only the screech of an owl that had alarmed her; but the more trivial the cause the worse the state of her nerves. Certain now that she would never settle down to sleep unless he could reassure her, he determined to gain speech of her. Just as

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he opened his mouth to begin another idea animated him. He smiled as if he meant to have a little amusement out of the affair, and so he succeeded in doing. Aware that his voice and Tony's resembled one another, also quite alive to the fact that Tony was her favourite, he called softly in the accents and words of his elder brother :

"Your Grace, sweet, your Grace! are you not happy?"

As he half expected, she did not answer. The smile only broadened on his face at the rebuff; he returned to the charge, and this time had the audacity to ask for something more in response.

"See here, your Grace, if you will unhasp the door, I will lift it ever so little, just enough for you to put out your hand, and I swear to do no more than kiss it. Surely you will allow me this little recompense for all my trouble?"

The appeal seemed to touch her. He heard her hand at the bolt, then wait there awhile as if uncertain if she dared to push it back. When a woman hesitates she is lost, thought Ralph, and began to importune her to do what he wanted.

"Only one kiss, dear lady," he pleaded still in his brother's voice.

"Promise to release it afterwards," whispered the unseen speaker.

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"On my honour as a gentleman," asseverated Ralph, and then he had his reward.

The hand was quickly saluted, as quickly withdrawn, the door once more lowered and bolted, upon which Ralph gave another delighted chuckle.

"It was a fraud no doubt, but a pious one," muttered he. "She will sleep all the better after that," and he coiled himself up contentedly on his uncomfortable bed as if he too had received a sleeping potion.

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CHAPTER XV

DEUS EX MACHINÂ

Two hours of tranquil sleep was all the hardship that Ralph derived from mounting guard upstairs. It was Tony's turn to relieve him, and suddenly his slumbers semed to be disturbed by the idea. Set yourself to awake at some given hour, and more often than not you will. Tony sat up with a yawn, stretched himself, looked enviously at the unconscious Roger, then rose, lighted a taper, replenished the wood fire and walked noiselessly above.

"You're a nice sort of companion for a timid woman I don't think," whispered he, shaking Ralph into wakefulness. "I suppose it's no use asking how she has been passing the time?"

The two brothers listened awhile, then catching no sound from below, nodded to one another and parted. The younger was soon downstairs with Roger and fast asleep before the kitchen fire, the elder remained above thinking of the woman now

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so close to him, and wondering what was to be the end of it all. Presently, however, his head dropped on his breast, and he continued his surmises in dreamland.

And now the three brothers were sleeping sounder than ever. If it occurred to any of their somnolent minds that it was time to relieve Wilfred, it may also have occurred to them that it was for him to make the first move, and they only slept the more peacefully for the sense of security his cold wet vigil outside afforded them. Yet it would seem that this was a false security. Had they been on the alert they had assuredly taken alarm at certain sounds in the forest. True, the wind was high and the ground soft with rain, hence the tramp of iron shod hoofs muffled. But when a calvalcade of men drew rein outside the mill, the ring of chain-bits and the snort of blown horses were quite distinct from the various noises of the tempest. What could Wilfred be about not to give the alarm? The leader of the party cast his bridle to a companion, dismounted and stalked unchallenged into the mill. Another moment and he stood within the doorway of the kitchen in silent contemplation of the two sleepers. Ralph dreamed on of otiose life in rustic England, but Roger's vision became one of battle and blood. The stranger glided

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forward until he looked down upon the unconscious forms, then threw off his cloak and stirred the nearest with the scabbard of his sword. It happened to be Roger, who started up at once and gazed at the visitor, then "The King!" he gasped, and looked around for a weapon.

"Yes, my friend, the King," said Francis, gloating over the dismayed face. "But don't let me disturb you, I pray. Where is number three?"

"Look you, Sire," said Roger fiercely, "I and my brother here may be at your mercy, but Tony will never give her up alive."

"Very heroic of him, especially as he will not be asked to give her up at all," remarked Francis.

By now the conversation had aroused Ralph, who, unlike his brother, seemed in no way put out at the sudden appearance of the King, but sat nodding and smiling at the speakers with a very knowing look.

"Ridiculous idiot!" muttered Roger as he suddenly became aware of this pantomime at his elbow, and "Hah!" exclaimed Francis as if he too hardly comprehended Ralph's coolness, "my friend here appears pleased to see me, so perhaps he will answer my question as to the whereabouts of Master Anthony?"

"Upstairs—the lady too; she is"—(Ralph eyed

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the King with a mischievous expression) "Lettice Brandon."

"He's mad!" cried Roger.

"He doesn't look it," remarked the King, "but when, may I ask, did you find out that, my giant?"

"Since arriving here. But, Sire, I half expected you to look disappointed at the lady's name."

"You looked it instead," laughed Francis, "and you may conclude that why *I* didn't was because I knew it already."

"Why, then, your Highness's presence here to-night?" asked the disconcerted Roger.

"Come," said Francis, "we are on the verge of a friendly understanding. "May I sit down?"

Before Roger could say yea or nay, Ralph sprang up, set one of the saddles at table for the King's use and began to arrange the remains of the food in front of him. Noticing that Roger looked still only half satisfied the King addressed his next remark to him.

"Last time I came to supper you were not there to receive me, my friends."

"There were so many uninvited guests," was the dry response.

"Indeed! then they were invisible to my blind eyes."

"Happily, we were wide awake," retorted Roger.

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The King laid down his knife. "I will not partake of your hospitality under false pretences. This time I am aware of having brought friends with me; the mill yard is thronged with them." He meant this as a menace; Roger's manner had begun to nettle him. Happily Ralph set matters right: "I will invite them up," cried he cordially.

"No," said Francis, "let them be. They will not be wanted, I conceive, unless——" and here he glanced to where Roger had begun to edge towards the door. "I am afraid," he added, "even a solitary guest is unwelcome to your brother, Master Ralph," upon which the latter caught hold of Roger and brought him back. "Well, then," said the King on seeing this, "as time is short and I shall soon have finished eating" (he poured himself out some wine), "I will explain my presence here with the same candour and brevity as Master Ralph has displayed. I have been in the secret throughout. I hope I shall not disappoint you by saying that it was mine as much as yours. The fact is I have for some time past taken a lively interest in the two lovers upstairs. My scheme to bring them together has so far succeeded, I find that you can now help me to put the finishing touch to it."

"How?" asked Ralph eagerly.

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"By leaving them together and coming on with me to Rheims this very night."

Ralph began to collect his belongings preparatory to an immediate start, but "Not quite so fast brother," cried Roger, "the King has yet to tell us his designs on our now helpless mistress."

"True," said Francis, "they are friendly, I assure you."

"She is to remain on at the Hôtel de Clugny, I suppose?" suggested Roger.

"Of her own accord. It was the last wish she expressed to me."

"Then her mood has curiously changed since I saw her," said Roger increduously.

"I compassed that feat in an audience she did me the honour to grant before leaving Paris," replied Francis.

"Under favour, Sire, I should like to hear the argument you made such good use of."

"And shall. She is to be free to bestow her hand in marriage on whom she chooses. She paid me the compliment of naming the happy man. It would not be honourable of me to mention it to you."

"And unnecessary; we know, Sire."

"Then all I need say is, that if you come with me, you will soon meet him."

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"Sire," cried Roger, rising and putting on his hat and cloak," you are a very worthy gentle."

"Nobody but you ever found it necessary to assure me of the fact."

"And I," quoth the blunt Ralph, "have been wasting my pity all this while."

"On whom?" asked Francis curiously.

"On Queens Mary and Claude—on all France, whom I now congratulate."

"*Peste!*" said the King. "The compliments of these brothers sting worse than their insults. Now if you are ready for the road come quietly away."

"Is cousin Wilfred expecting us outside, Sire?" whispered Roger as he crept after the King towards the yard.

"I fancy not. He was not wholly in the secret, and—well, it's a case of the wicked fleeing when no man pursueth."

"He has run away then? Mayhap, Sire, he thought, like me, that the Queen was with us."

"On the contrary, he was the one to originate the idea of carrying off his sister instead. Your kinsman, my friends, imagined that he was playing me false when in reality he was my dupe."

Here they reached the open, and for the third time in their lives the brothers beheld the weird

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forms of the King's friends ranged sword in hand at the exit of their retreat. On this occasion, however, they were neither to be dreaded nor shunned. Hats were ceremoniously lifted on all sides. Then, whilst these gallants mounted their own beasts, Roger and Ralph led out and bestrode the pair of litter horses, and with such expedition that five minutes later the forest had swallowed up the whole troop.

Albeit Tony had remained fast asleep throughout the occurrence, Lettice had been brought out of an uneasy dream by the sounds. Since she had permitted the supposed Tony to kiss her hand she had passed the time in dozing and thinking. The sense of nearness to her lover had dissipated her superstitious fears, but the touch of his lips had raised others scarcely less harrowing. The caress she believed to have been intended for the Queen. If, consequently, Tony's heart was still full of Mary, what would be his feeling when he discovered that she had come in Mary's stead? She wished now she had never taken this step, yet a week before she was expecting it to land her in a veritable paradise of joys. Her brother had been the first to suggest it to her. He had shown her a letter from the Duke of Norfolk warning him of Suffolk's advent, and exhorting him to prevent by fair means

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or foul any private communications between him and Mary. To promote the Queen's escape from Paris after receiving these instructions would be to connive at her falling in with Suffolk, hence his proposal to Lettice that she should take Mary's place in the secret flight. The girl declined. She would not lend herself any longer to Norfolk's intrigues against her now esteemed mistress. She did not tell Wilfred this, but made some other excuse for refusing his offer. Then the King came to her with much the same suggestion, only put in a different light. It was, he said, a little mystery play he had been getting up as much to please others as himself. Not an actor in it but would reap some benefit. Even her brother, falsely as he would be playing his part, should not suffer. As for Lettice herself, she was to be the heroine of the piece, and as such would merit the lion's share of the rewards. Francis went on to explain matters to Lettice; he represented himself as now the champion not only of her dearest interests but of Mary's. As her's, his aim was to bring about a complete and satisfactory rupture between her lover and Mary, and as the Queen's he had been brought a wide step nearer this end in that there was no longer the necessity of Tony's championship of this fascinating being. In short, Lettice had only

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to take Mary's place in the litter for all to end happily. Francis added that he for his part already seemed to hear the melody of marriage bells.

Lettice, though dazzled by his arguments, withheld her assent until she had consulted her mistress. She found Mary as eager for her to assume the *rôle* allotted to her by the King as he was. Francis and she had just held a long and interesting consultation, which if it had begun in storm ended in calm. He had charged her with the design of escaping from him, and on her failing to clear herself from the accusation had gone on to reproach her with a want of confidence in him. Still meeting with no denial, he began to protest he was her best friend, even if not suffered to be something more tender still; exhorted her to be quite frank with him under the promise that he would sink self in endeavours to promote her best interests.

What could the helpless lady do but take him at his word? Out came her secret of undying love for Suffolk, her fears that the King might find it out and wreak vengeance on her lover, her efforts to keep him off the scent by listening favourably to his own love-making, her real resolve to have nothing to say to him or any other suitor than Suffolk. Francis was a vain man, but also a

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chivalrous one. He swallowed his chagrin and gave full vent to his generosity. So far, he told her, he had considered it a fair struggle between himself and Suffolk to win her. Well, he supposed he had lost the contest, and could now only show his regard for her by assisting his rival. France owed her a debt of gratitude as well as England for sacrificing herself in the cause of peace, as she had done by marrying the sickly Louis. France's monarch would undertake to repay her. How, did she ask? By reconciling Henry her brother to the proposed marriage. Now let her say if she preferred to remain in Paris or take her departure in a fashion so ignominous to a Queen as that she had been contemplating. Of course she gave up the idea of flight, and then Francis divulged his scheme of substituting Lettice in her stead. Mary was delighted. Like all women she was a matchmaker, as well as fond of Lettice, and grateful for all Tony had done for her. She therefore entered into the intrigue *con amore*, laughed over the part allotted to the treacherous Wilfred, and consented to keep up the delusion under which he was labouring.

In this mood Lettice had found her. No wonder the girl relinquished her opposition to the plan. For a moment she wanted Francis to abandon the

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mystery of it, and at least take her lover into his confidence. But she soon was made to perceive that Tony's distrust of the King was too deep-seated to be all at once eradicated, and therefore that he might suspect there was some treachery underlying the venture, such as that Francis had only sought to rid Paris of all the Queen's English before commencing to persecute her more disgracefully than ever. If, on the other hand, her lover could be enticed half way to Calais to meet his Grace of Suffolk, he might decide to go the other half, especially as there would be no need to hurry back to Mary until after the King's sacréing at Rheims. So Lettice went back to Wilfred and gave in to his wishes, upon which followed the interview between him and the brothers on the Seine already recorded.

But Lettice had not bargained to be left all alone with her lover in this deserted mill. She had never been told that the King intended it. For that matter Francis himself had not foreseen the opportunity of throwing the lovers at one another's heads in this manner until he suggested it to Roger and Ralph in the kitchen. He had come prepared to intercede on Lettice's behalf with her fickle swain. When he found him momentarily absent, and Wilfred fled for good, he adopted the plan

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which commended itself admirably to his fondness for romance and mystery.

But if he imagined he had left behind a second St. Anthony, bating that holy man's capabilities of resistance to fleshly lusts, he was destined to be disappointed. Lettice knew her lover far better than the King did, and listened with the utmost dismay to the sounds of the departing cavalcade. Even then she hoped that somebody had remained behind, until the prolonged stillness caused her to realise the worst. Tony's regular breathing above maddened her. She longed for him to awake and find out for himself the desertion of his brothers and cousin, so that the truth might slowly dawn upon him, instead of coming as a shock at the sight of herself. She knew, too, how unbearable, how infuriating the truth would be. That she, his sweetheart of all people, should have conspired against him! That her jealousy (oh! he was sure to call it that) should have shattered all his cherished plans for the Queen. To be treated thus by a friend would be bad enough, but by the woman who had promised to be his helpmate through life—faugh! he would call it the blackest treachery. No wonder then that dread of Tony soon eclipsed the fears that had taken possession of her earlier that night. Lettice was a brave

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woman under ordinary circumstances. But here in this haunted mill she had allowed herself to fall the prey of superstitious horrors. The story of the hanged miller had been unwisely repeated to her by Wilfred. When he had taken her indoors and left her a moment to select a bedplace for her, it was all she could do not to shriek out in her terror. Then he had insisted upon her staying in this distant part of the building, because it afforded her a means of exit in case the King arrived before he had made off. She vowed she would die of fright unless she was in a position within sound of some one, and at last wrung from him his consent to the brothers taking it in turns to occupy the floor overhead.

Her instructions were to be ready to escape into the forest in the event of the King's premature arrival, and when caught by Ralph at the door she had been rehearsing what she would have to do at such a crisis. It had seemed to her, then, horrible to flee out into the vast lonely covert. Now once or twice she regarded the step with some favour. Anything to evade this meeting with Tony. And yet, and yet, what if he proved less terrible than she foreboded? He loved her once upon a time very dearly, possessed a soft heart and a forgiving nature. Ought she not to make the attempt to

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obtain his forgiveness? All her future happiness depended now on what he would have to say to her. She must be certain first that he was irreconcilable and then—here she shivered, there was always that left for a broken heart, thank God or the devil!

Further uncertainty had now become unbearable, and, bracing herself up to the trial, she mounted the ladder once more, unlatched the bolt of the trap-door, and pushed it up. Tony lay close beside it, his unconscious face was lit up by the candle, and with a sudden gush of tenderness she awoke him with a kiss. He blinked his beautiful brown eyes once or twice, and recognised her.

"You! you!" he cried, in the act of rising, and at the tone of his voice her courage sank to nothing.

"Where, then, is the Queen?" he asked icily.

"Safe and happy in Paris. May I not be your Queen now, Tony dear?" said Lettice beseechingly.

"The others?"

"Gone."

"Of their own accord? They knew of this?"

"Yes."

Tony burst into tears.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE GHOST OF THE MILL

If Tony had struck her, Lettice could not have suffered more than she did at the sight of him weeping. To shed his tears would be, from a man's point of view, worse than shedding his blood. Those drops of the soul's hurt seemed to wash away all hopes of a reconciliation. Then in the unselfishness of her love she tried to relieve his misery, and burst out with a full account of the intrigue, laying much stress on the Queen's now joyful prospects. Tony listened in stony silence till she had done; but though all signs of his emotion had gone he looked, if possible, more moody and low-spirited than before. It was probable, she thought, that he was poignantly disappointed at the Queen's welfare having been secured by another than himself, and she began to recount acts of his which had led up to the King's happy change of feeling for Mary. But Tony soon cut her short with a formal politeness

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that seemed a foretaste of what his future relations with her were to be.

"Mistress Lettice," he began (poor soul! how she started at the unusual prefix to her name) "you have brought yourself and me into a very compromising position. What will the world say?"

"The world!" she cried, stung to irony by his manner, "we are in a world to ourselves. The trees outside, the stones in here, won't repeat what they know."

"But the King and his crew will, until every Paris guardroom rings with ribald jests at our expense."

"You are vastly solicitous for your good name," she remarked irritably.

"For yours, rather say. I will do my best to uphold it under the trying circumstances. Foul minds may invent what they please of how a lonely maid and bachelor spent their night here. Our actions shall give them the lie."

Then shooting a glance at her, "You are shivering, I perceive. Follow me and I will endeavour to make you more comfortable." He led her to the kitchen, revived the fire, constructed a seat before it, and bade her sit and warm herself.

"And you?" she asked, seeing him move towards the door.

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"I shall be within call if you want anything," then without another word he went back to the grindstone floor.

Lettice sat awhile contemplating her deary prospects, and the more she did so the worse they appeared. She interpreted his anxiety for her reputation as a proof he had ceased to regard her as his future wife. An affianced husband would have, found nothing in the situation to designate improper. Yes, her Tony had given her up. Other men, he fancied, might some day woo her, who had heard of her night's sojourn at the mill, all alone with a former lover, and would ask awkward questions, maybe draw disgraceful conclusions. At least Tony's precautions would enable her to meet their reproaches with the assurance of innocence. If that were his object he might have saved himself the inconvenience. She would never marry another. But stay, *he* might! Well, no tradition of this night should come between him and the fortunate girl. She would leave him in solitary possession of the mill, steal off into the dreaded forest, and start life anew at whatever spot her tired body struck work. It was no sacrifice to do so; she was of her whole sex the most desperate wherever she went. The world was the same all over to a cast-off love.

She got up and gazed round the silent room,

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Her eye fell on the food and drink still unconsumed. She determined not to go before she had paid him a last fond attention, and broke out sobbing as she realised the wifeliness of it.

First she arranged the plates and dishes for his breakfast, then noticing that the dawn was breaking, put the kettle on the hob, and whilst it was warming, got ready the ingredients of a comforting posset, breaking eggs and pouring wine into a saucepan with the practised hand of a housewife.

Whilst bending over to stir the mixture a few tears dropped in. No matter; an extra spoonful of honey would prevent him from tasting their bitterness. Then, fearful lest he should come and find her thus employed, she hurriedly attired herself in her cloak, gave a last sad look at his solitary place at table, saw one of his gloves on the floor, picked it up, thrust it into her bodice and stole out of doors.

She crossed the planking, and set out up stream along a path close beside the water. Swift and eager, tranquil withal, as though on a pleasant errand, it flowed past her. Where was it going? On to the Seine, through Paris, but to the ocean at last, the vast heaving element where there was water enough to drown all human sorrow and hide all human secrets. The sight of the river, the thought

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of its goal, seemed to fascinate her. Presently she endowed it with personality, moreover a personality friendly to her if she could but commit herself to its embrace. This entailed drowning; would it be so great a calamity? Death was the recognised gate to every heaven. Down there, deep down, beyond the reach of fretting rain and teasing wind, might be some heaven of which no theology had yet dreamed nor philosophy evolved. What was the alternative? Let her present surroundings make answer—the gale, the rain, the trees; her brain, her blood, her thoughts; all the same—tempestuous. At least she might expect to find in the bed of the Marne stillness, calm, even nescience.

As the now frantic girl hovered on the brink making up her mind for the fatal plunge, a fiercer gust of wind than usual tore asunder the fastenings of her cloak, and the next moment it was eddying past her in the current.

Never mind! It had only preceded her there, and with one last look upon earth she made ready to follow it. But in that look her eye had chanced on an object in the path ahead which arrested her purpose. It did more, sent all her blood racing back to its fount and chained her to the spot. A tall white form was coming on at her which seemed to her diseased fancy to be draped in cerements.

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A cord streamed out in the wind behind it, and the head, bare and glinting white in the dimness of dawn, resembled a skull. A few paces in its rear were two other forms, black as night, attendant fiends she thought, but the one in front fascinated her most.

"The hanged miller!" she whispered through her blanched lips, and as the ghostly visitant halted and seemed to point her out to his hellish companions, the while regarding her earnestly out of the sockets where its eyes had once been, Lettice gave a loud scream, recovered the use of her limbs and began to scud back the way she came.

Meanwhile her lover had been pacing up and down the grindstone storey in deep thought. Lettice had quite misunderstood his tears. They had been drawn forth by an agonising paroxysm of self-abhorrence. He had never quite been able to deceive himself into believing that his devotion to Mary was consistent with his good faith to Lettice. The revelation that his brothers, after repeated warnings, had found it necessary to revolt openly against his heartlessness, that everybody had noticed it, and even the careless rake of a King taken pity on his sweetheart, had brought him to book at last. That he, Tony Brandon, who set such store on his integrity, who detested meanness in others, who

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had preached constancy as the loftiest of the virtues, should have thus fallen was an intolerable idea. With it came the paralysing feeling that the crime was irremediable. He knew he could never love Lettice now as a husband should. Mary had stolen that kind of love; Mary would possess it forever. Men like him never got over such a passion. Its object would wed his lord of course, but he should go on loving her just the same. To think of her another's wife was not such a punishment as he suffered now at the thought of Lettice's wrecked life. He had longed to ask her pardon, but feared that by so doing he might raise hopes which he felt he could never satisfy. The dilemma reduced him to that chilling politeness which had only harrowed her feelings afresh. Perceiving this he had become as irritated as pitiful with the cause of his trouble, and though he would have given anything not to show it, nevertheless had done so, thus driving the poor girl to distraction. She did not perceive that it was transitory, nor that her last hungry contrite look had touched him to the quick. He, on the other hand, had committed the error of fleeing from that look, instead of staying to give play to the impulse it had excited in him. Not that he could escape in that way. The look went with him, and alone on the grindstone floor brought other softening

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influences to bear, memories of the past, all that had been between him and her before his unfortunate meeting with Mary, until early scenes of their courtship became as vivid as the scenes of yesterday. He recalled touching evidences of a love that had overleaped the bounds of prudence and did but revel in the fact, sacred confidences she would not have suffered her dearest girl-friend to hear, confidences that would have sounded immodest to any other ears than a lover's, confidences that if she could have foreseen he would some day cease to be a lover she would have died before uttering. Then he took to picturing her future, the gap in her life which he felt sure she would never allow to be filled, the secret wasting sorrow ever preying on her gaiety, gradually sapping her amiability until she grew into an acid old maid.

This was pity at best, but it brought Tony back to Lettice's feet. He entered the kitchen only to find it empty. Even then if he had run out at once he might have seen her and spared her that fright. But he stopped to dwell on the evidences of her last tender thought for him, the posset simmering on the hob, the single place laid for his breakfast, his belongings carefully folded or laid ready for use, until, with a prodigious sigh, he seized his hat and ran out in time to hear her scream. It was

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too dark to distinguish objects that were not close under his eye. But one was, that, something horribly like a drowned girl, and "Oh God!" he cried and plunged in.

Poor Tony! throughout his career it had been just the same. He had risked life over and over again to grasp at the shadow; now it seemed he had lost life just when the substance was within his reach. With this miserable reflection at his heart the cruel current swept him out of sight under the foundations of the mill.

Lettice, flying from the ghost of the hanged miller, heard Tony's cry, and the splash that followed it, and came up in time to see him struggling hopelessly in the mill-waste. Forgetting all else in his danger she went flying past the buildings to the mill-tail, watched till she beheld her lover's body come into view through the arched aqueduct, perceived also the illusive cloak that preceded it, and having become once again a resolute, brave, calculating woman, stood waiting to see whither the current would carry it.

Swiftly, surely, both objects came bobbing up and down towards her, Tony more often than not out of sight, the lighter cloak floating all the way. Presently it reached a spot a rod lower than where she stood, paused in an eddy, was caught in the

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reflux of water, hurried a yard or so in her direction, then as if thinking better of it, allowed itself to be whirled downstream beyond her view. Her lover showed no signs of life, not even the cloak's plausible imitation of it; but, inert like a corpse, was borne along in its wake. Even though a corpse she would have him somehow, and darting to the place where the cloak had appeared to hesitate in its course, she waded into the water up to her middle, and held out a pair of warm loving arms. But she was too eager; before Tony was swept within her reach, she overbalanced herself, fell upon him, clasped him round the middle, and locked together the lovers began their voyage to the sea.

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CHAPTER XVII

FRIAR JOHANNES

So long as she held Tony like that, Lettice was content to die or live. After the first chilling sensation the icy water did not seem disagreeable. She quickly became numbed and dazed, then arrived at that pleasant stage of drowning when the senses, especially the sight, are in a state of rapture. Presently, it might have been a moment of time or an eternity, powerful hands grasped her and her lover and drew them out of the river. Nothing appeared strange or distressing now, not even to be rescued by a ghost, as she believed she had been. Gradually she came back to her senses, and found herself sitting before the fire in the mill kitchen, with Tony stretched motionless at her feet, and the party from Hades absorbed in reviving him. The faculty to fear was perhaps still in abeyance as also that of wonder, for when she managed to gasp out a word of thanks to her awesome preservers

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she saw nothing unusual in their acknowledging it in her own tongue.

"No cause to thank us, damsel," said a melodious tenor voice, "it was our fault in coming so suddenly upon you. You took me for the foul fiend, I believe. But, see, I wear the other's livery."

Then Lettice discovered the trick her superstitious fears had played her. An Augustine friar was addressing her, two brethren of another order bent over Tony. The skull of the hanged miller had resolved itself into a monk's shaven head, the rope into the long ends of his girdle, whilst the satanic aspect of the other two appeared to have been evolved out of nothing more realistic than the blackness of their tunics and cowls. Yet, though Lettice had lost all excuse to be horrified at these men, she dropped her eyes with a shiver, such as she had given that day in Greenwich Park when Mary Tudor unknowingly stole her lover's heart, such a shiver as she asseverated on her dying bed had always forewarned her of disaster. She quickly perceived the unreasonableness of the gesture. Here were men of God, sent by Him, manifestly, on purpose to extricate her and Tony from the jaws of death, not aliens but her own countrymen, for nobody but natives of England could have

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addressed her in the pure Anglo-Saxon which they used. As she thus reasoned with herself he of the white Order began to ply her with questions. She tried to give him her attention but failed, for just then one of his companions happened to move so that the still white face of her lover met her eyes.

"He is gone!" she wailed and made an effort to throw herself upon the body.

"On the contrary," quoth the friar, restraining her, "he is coming back! See, maiden, he breathes. Your——" he hesitated and looked askance at her.

"My brother," she suggested, mindful of what Tony had said about their compromising position.

"Ah! just what I expected. And you, mistress?"

"Am called Lettice Brandon."

"Now I am in possession of all I hoped to learn. This gentleman is, without doubt, Wilfred Brandon, a retainer of the Duke of Norfolk's."

"And you, father?" she asked, more out of politeness than any interest she as yet felt for the stranger.

He hesitated; then sharply, "You are in your brother's confidence, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," answered Lettice mendaciously, for she was beginning to have her wits about her, and

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scented trouble in this monk's unexpected visit to the mill.

"Your brother gave me to understand as much in—his letter. Then you will know all about me when I say I am Father Johannes?"

"My brother mentioned he was expecting an emissary of his Grace of Norfolk," said Lettice with glib tongue but beating heart, for she was only guessing as yet at the facts of the case. The friar nodded and was going to say something more, when a faint murmur from Tony diverted the attention of both speakers.

"Let me go to him," begged Lettice, and Father Johannes assisted her to do so. Tony opened his eyes for an instant and looked at her, but closed them again without a sign of recognition. She did not know how soon he might repeat the look with better results, and she wanted him all to herself during the first few moments of consciousness. So "leave him to me now, kind gentlemen," she pleaded, and the monks desiring to be together in private a moment willingly complied.

Then Lettice bethought her of the warm drink she had prepared for Tony. She found that most of it had boiled away, but the remains were all the more potent on that account, and she managed to get them down her patient's throat. She awaited

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results with the utmost suspense, and presently was rewarded by another look followed by a squeeze of the hand which was in Tony's grasp.

"Listen, Tony dear," she whispered, "can you understand that I have something important to say?"

But he only answered with a deep drawn sigh, after which his breathing became regular and slow like that of a sleeper. For half an hour Lettice sat on with her hand in his waiting for her opportunity to warn him against the monks, and before it came they were back in the room. The friar was anxious, she saw, to have further speech with her, and, fearful lest their voices should disturb the sleeper, she signed to him to follow her upstairs and prepared for what she felt was going to be a trial of wits. She was not in a fit state for it, poor girl, having tasted nothing since the night before and being worn out with sleeplessness and all that she had gone through. Yet for her lover's sake she braced herself up for the encounter, and Father Johannes met his match.

Now she had a chance of studying his appearance she beheld a tall man with eyes of that particular grey which of all hues is the most attractive, regular and refined features and a noble expanse of forehead. Yet perhaps his voice was the greatest charm about him; perfect instrument

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in itself, he had attained perfection in its uses, and could modulate it to a nicety, whether its accents were scornful, consoling, imperious, persuasive.

"Pardon my taking you away for a moment from your patient, Mistress Lettice Brandon," he began, "but time flies and I have none to spare. Therefore I am going to entrust you with a message to your brother." He paused and brought those piercing eyes to bear on Lettice, then apparently satisfied went on. "This is also my excuse for hurrying on to Paris without him. My address is here," he handed her a paper, "beg him to join us as soon as possible. I shall, I fear, be requiring his assistance before then. He was, you understand, to give me a few hints about—eh?" Here he again eyed her piercingly.

"The White Queen," ventured Lettice.

"Exactly, I see you are in the secret."

"Perhaps I might do as well as Wilfred. What is it you want to know, sir?"

"Now we are getting to the point. You have been, I am informed, in even closer attendance on Mary Tudor than your brother."

"Yes, father."

"And have doubtless studied her character, its strong points and weak; the latter will be more in my line."

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"She is very lovable."

"And quite as loving, I fear. It will take me all my time to shake her devotion to—you know who," again that penetrating look.

"His Grace of Suffolk," suggested Lettice.

"Hush! mention no names, I beg." Then as Lettice waited to hear something more, "Well, you are to understand I shall have to represent that individual in a disagreeable light. What would be most likely to set her against him—inconstancy?"

Lettice felt herself now on surer ground, and quickly made up her mind to describe her mistress's character precisely the opposite to what it really was. There was just sufficient hesitancy in her manner to strike the wily monk, and he spoke again before she could frame her answer.

"Oh! I see," said he, "she is not particular; indeed should not be, considering her suitor's antecedents. Maybe she is superstitious?"

Now Lettice was aware that this was the last foible that Mary would be prone to. Like her brother, the King, she had received a liberal education and favoured the New Learning, the enlightened exponents of which were the chief antagonists of superstitions, monkish in particular.

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So she replied with a brightened face in the affirmative.

"And, consequently," proceeded the friar, "if I make her believe that—you know who—dabbles in the black art, is a sort of being for whom you at first mistook me, I might rely on a certain amount of credulity. I may add I have brought proofs with me sufficient for the purpose."

"I am only an ignorant girl, father," said the false jade meekly.

"Of course, of course, and deprecate the responsibility of advising in a matter so grave. But you are a faithful girl, and his Grace of Norfolk shall hear as much. Now I must be going. Take my advice, daughter, and change those wet things at once." He made the sign of their common faith over her and hurried downstairs, she following in fear that he might dally a moment with Tony. To her dismay he did worse still, found the patient conscious.

"You are better, I see, my son," he murmured in the tranquilising tones of the sick room. "Maybe sufficiently yourself to recognise me?"

"Hardly," said Tony dryly, "I never to my knowledge set eyes on you before."

"True, but you have been expecting a stranger in my garb," and Lettice beheld the friar kneel

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down beside her lover. "Come, think!" he added indulgently.

"Pshaw! sir," said Tony with all a sick person's fractiousness, "introduce yourself; I have no brains left to puzzle with."

"Father Johannes," said the monk expectantly.

"Oh!" remarked Tony disinterestedly.

"You got his Grace's letter?"

"What Grace?" asked Tony drowsily.

"Norfolk," answered Friar Johannes.

"Not likely! His Grace of that name does not correspond with any of Suffolk's people.

"Oh dear!" said the friar, addressing Lettice, "that bath in the river, mistress, has washed out all your brother's wits. Come, master Wilfred Brandon, think again."

"At least it has not washed out my name. I am still Anthony Brandon, late of Lord Suffolk's retinue, at present the devoted servant of Queen Mary, yours as well, sir, unless you really mean you belong to the opposite side. Hallo! you look as if you had seen the devil."

If so the monk must have quickly recovered his composure, for he turned but a pitying face to Lettice, shook his head as much as to imply he thought her brother only half conscious; and, gathering his belongings into his arms, glided out

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of the room. Lettice waited five minutes, then sprang to her lover's side and began to explain the true state of affairs. But Tony, as if wearied out with the short interview, had already sunk back to sleep.

The monk, meanwhile, joined his comrades in a high state of flurry. "Come on, come on!" he cried, "we must not stop another moment, or our errand will be ruined."

"How? by whom?" asked his friends blankly.

"Suffolk's right hand man—one Tony Brandon, whom I wish I had left to drown. A murrain on my dull brains! See here, *fratres*, our cloister teaching is all very well in its way, but it leaves much information to be desired—*exemple*, the way of a man with a maid. I took those two for brother and sister!"

"And they are——?" asked one of the others.

"Sweethearts! The girl hails right enough from the Howard Duchy, but her swain is of the other persuasion."

"The saints preserve us!" cried one of his hearers, and "Bother the saints!" said the other. "Let us rather look to ourselves for preservation. They have beasts of burden in there, mules, alack! Sorry mounts at best, nevertheless his Grace of York and even cardinals prefer them to horses.

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At all events to purloin these quadrupeds will be to delay pursuit."

"Right!" said Friar Johannes, and presently the trio disappeared with their booty.

Lettice did not stay long at Tony's side. Her teeth had begun to chatter, her limbs to ache; she felt burning one minute, frozen the next. The fear that she was going to be seriously ill just at the time when Tony needed her most, led her to recall the friar's advice. Her wet things steamed now that she had come back to the warm kitchen, and she perceived that she ought to change into some other apparel at once. But what? That was the difficulty; for she had not brought any extra clothing with her. This led her to adopt a very unwise alternative, namely to dry herself at the fire. She had not knelt long in this position before she felt worse. Fever had caught her in its fierce embrace. She dreaded becoming light-headed, and determined to get away into some corner where her babbling would not disturb her lover. She rose with difficulty to her feet and began to fear her strength would give out before she could accomplish her object. Dragging her limbs after her she supported herself by such articles that came in her way as far as the door. Hanging on a peg there she saw Tony's cloak and

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appropriated it, slowly and painfully mounted the stairs, reached the storey above, where she was reduced to crawling on hands and knees to the spot which she had predestined for her sick room. It was the grindstone floor on which Tony had made his bed. The sweet thought that she would be lying where he had lain, gave her strength to get as far. With a last effort of will she entirely divested herself of her own clothes, and wrapping her lover's cloak about her, lay down, as she now fully expected to die. Her last rational idea was a hope that if he came and found her dead, he would bury her in his mantle, for if any shroud were able to make her rest in peace that would.

Half an hour later, Lettice was in a delirium; but Tony stretched in front of a comforting fire, on the soft couch that Lettice had succeeded in making up for him, slept away the remaining hours of daylight in blissful ignorance of her critical condition as well as of the fresh menace to the Queen's welfare. Towards night he awoke hungry but rested. Reluctant to stir, he was pleased not to find any necessity for so doing; one of Lettice's last acts having been to arrange some food within his reach. He ate heartily, then fell into a brown study. The events of the last twenty-four hours came slowly back to his mind, not all but enough

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to afford him a succinct account of the more important episodes. He remembered every word of Lettice's confession upstairs, and of his reception of it, as well as the effect it had upon her. Up to the moment of finding her fled from him, everything was clear. The catastrophe which followed was more hazy; he believed he had attempted to rescue her from drowning, but what followed after that was still a blank to his mind. Wait! it had only been her mantle that he had clutched hold of in the river. Consequently she had not been drowned, probably had not even made the attempt. Where was she then? Who had brought him back to life and deposited him there? He had dreamed something about a monk who spoke English and called him Wilfred Brandon. What nonsense dreams were! Certainly none of his countrymen could have turned up in this out-of-the-way district of France. So he set aside the idea of a monk having tended him, and came to the conclusion that Lettice had not gone far off, when he failed to find her in the kitchen, had perhaps only pretended to desert him in hopes that he would relent at the idea, and receive her back with some of the old loverliness. Yes, that was it; she must have been hiding hard-by, and on witnessing his plunge into the Marne, come forth and rescued him. How a weak girl

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could have done so he failed to see. He might leave that for her to relate when they met again. But where could she be? He looked round to see if there were any signs of her being still about, failed to find any, not even some odds and ends of her belongings, and began to feel uneasy.

"Lettice!" he called twice, and though his voice was as strong as ever, it met with no response. He rose and tried to stand, the room swam with him, and he barely managed to totter to a seat without a fall. He poured out a cup of wine, drank it off, and waited to see if that would bring back strength. As he did so the night gathered in, and before it was too dark to discern objects he determined to light a candle. Even this requirement his sweetheart had foreseen, and he had only to stoop to where the materials had been deposited at his bedside.

The storm had ceased, the wind had lulled, all around was still. Yet what sound was that? An owl hooting? There were many about, he knew from the previous night's experiences. No, that was a human voice, he durst be sworn. There it was again, a woman's cry sure enough. Lettice! and in trouble. The emergency lent him strength, and seizing the light, he staggered out of the kitchen, listened a moment at the foot of the stairs, then

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sped upwards to the grindstone floor. He opened the door and held his candle on high, then in a trice extinguished it. He had received one more proof that Providence destined them twain to become one flesh, and he fetched a bitter sigh.

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CHAPTER XVIII

TONY FAILS IN HIS PART

GROPING his way to the bedside Tony reverently restored the cloak, lifted her in his arms, and not without several halts, to recover breath and strength, carried her down to the warm kitchen. Then it was his turn to feed and comfort. The husbandliness of it struck him quite as forcibly as had the wifeliness of her previous actions struck her. But Tony only groaned at the notion. All that night he sat tending her and trying to reconcile himself to this marriage. His brother's words rang in his ears: "You will be very good to her ever after, you can make it up to her in that way." God's truth! he had a great deal to make up. She had given him her all, perhaps life itself: the wreck of a life was at best all he could return. To marry her was not everything; indeed worse than nothing if he were only prepared to become her husband in name. Never to show weariness of the same face,

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always to be ready to return an endearment, seemed to him little short of slavery. But were not others making the same sacrifice every day? Yes, but other men were able to play a false part, whereas he had no talent in that line. Still, he supposed practice would make perfect in time, even in playing the difficult part of husband. One thing would be in his favour. Mary would from all accounts soon become her Grace of Suffolk. He did not believe he could go through with it unless he was sure of that. Stop, he must not allow his thoughts to dwell on the other woman now, that would be treason, nothing less; and he bent over poor Lettice by way of an antidote to this kind of poison. She had been quieter since he had brought her down, but now was saying something or other, nonsense doubtless, but how often his name cropped up. "Tony, dear! Tony, darling!" and sometimes "Cruel Tony! hard Tony!" This time it was "Tony save me! the ghost! There, don't you see him?" He soothed her like a child, it was very easy, the mere sound of his voice was enough. Perhaps the task he had set himself would be no more difficult. This wife would not be very exacting, and no woman, not even that other, more ready to repay him for an act or word of tenderness.

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Tony never did things by halves. Once his mind became set on marriage with Lettice it became impatient to get it over. He had every preliminary thought out and arranged by morning. Obviously the first essential of an early marriage was the bride's restoration to health. So the dawn found him out in the forest in quest of diet suitable for a sick person and, quite as important, one of her own sex to nurse her. He took the same path that Lettice had taken until confronted by the supposed spectres, and no such obstacles coming in his way, pushed on up the Marne backwater to where was a small church crowning an eminence and nestling about its base the huts of some woodfolk. The men and lads were starting, axe on shoulder, for their day's work; the women stood watching them off from their cottage doors, whilst nearer, on a bridge, a young girl with a bucket in her hand stood watching Tony. On joining her there and accosting her, he was not surprised to learn that this self-sufficing little world knew nothing of the mill having been in occupation of travellers for two nights past, much less of their forest fastness having been honoured with the visit of the overlord of all the Franks. His tale of woe was received with exclamations of surprise and sympathy, offers to come and nurse the sick lady,

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contributions of milk, eggs, poultry, meal and so forth followed, and soon a nice quiet body was on her way to the scene of action laden with such food and restoratives as she was able to carry.

Then came the other and more momentous undertaking which had brought Tony here. He bent his steps to the house of the curé, and found himself in the presence of a benign old man who had grown grey and rusty amidst these simple surroundings. But if in matters of diction and manners he had lost some of the polish acquired in his Sorbonne days, that which was innate—viz., the delicate tact of a French gentleman, remained untarnished. Grasping at once the confidential nature of the communication his visitor desired to make, he suggested the confessional as the proper place for hearing it, upon which Tony, doubly assured that he was dealing with a man of honour and secretiveness, communicated to him fuller details of his relations with Lettice than he had come with the intention of doing. If throughout his story there had been noticeable a strain of *mea culpa* his confessor imposed no penances, simply pronounced the blessing, and then added a word of approval of the request that he should perform the marriage rites.

"My son," said he, "return in peace to the

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poor young demoiselle, and beg her from me to make haste and get well, so that I may soon have the joy of uniting her to so worthy a mate."

Tony obeyed with a mind at rest if not so light as that of a prospective bridegroom. It would not have been like him to repeat the curé's message, even if he had found Lettice in a condition to listen to it. She had, it seemed, already fallen out with her new nurse, would in fact have nobody near her but him, and greeted him with "Tony, Tony! send her away," a whim he felt constrained to indulge for the moment lest any show of opposition should bring back the fever. He was greatly relieved to find that she now recognised him. Nevertheless he soon had cause for believing that consciousness was still defective.

"Tony, dear," she whispered, as he installed himself once more at the post of nursing, "I have had a horrid dream. I saw you as distinctly as I see you now, but standing on a bridge over the river."

"And so I was, Lettice," he answered cheerfully; "surely you must have the double sight."

"Pray heaven not! for you were talking to that friar. And then—oh our Lady, keep the spectacle away!" broke off Lettice with a shriek.

"There! there!" said Tony soothingly, "your

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second sight is nothing to boast of after all. It was a pretty wench with whom I spoke. But what about the friar ?"

"Father Johannes, you know."

"Not I. Stay! I too had a vision of some monk who called me Wilfred, maybe he was Father Johannes ?"

"Dreams are funny things!" said Lettice, and shut tight her lips, for the dread had taken hold of her that if she said anything more she would lose Tony. Patently he retained only a vague memory of the monks' visit, and if he were told their errand would follow in pursuit of them. So she allowed Tony to think that her mind had been still wandering, and changing the subject back to the nursing difficulty gradually allowed herself to be reconciled to the stranger's sharing the post with her lover.

Time passed, and all the while Tony and the woman tended the sick girl assiduously. A milk diet, the pure forest air, the priest's simple nostrums, above all, her lover's constant presence, cured Lettice at last. She had never been so happy and contented. Tony seemed to have forgotten all about his other love and she took care not to remind him of her. At first she had been uneasy at the thought of having withheld from him the

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intelligence of this fresh intrigue against Suffolk, and feared a day of reckoning would come when Tony would reproach her almost as cruelly as he had done on discovering her presence there in Mary's stead. But as soon as she believed that whatever mischief had been brewing was now irrevocable, and had begun to hope that Tony would never discover her connivance in it, she thoroughly enjoyed the situation. Nor did her lover seem to be in a hurry to put an end to it. As a matter of fact he had been too engrossed in playing his own false part to perceive that she was playing one as well. So far he had withheld from her that interview with the curé, advised thereto by the holy man himself, who saw how essential to her recovery a quiet state of mind would be. But Tony had given her to understand that he no longer found any impediment to their immediate union, and the delighted girl began to look forward to their return to England as a journey which was to culminate in the marriage ceremony.

When Tony thought her strong enough to hear the glad tidings, he chose a sunny day when she was sitting out of doors to announce it. All was in trim, he told her, day and hour fixed, the curé expectant, a triumphal arch of evergreens in course of erection. Arm in arm they would hie to

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church, arm in arm leave it, and celebrate the event by a feast at which the wedding guests would be the entire village community.

With complete and lasting felicity within her reach Lettice showed some of the contrariety of her sex. Tony's plans were very delightful of course, but—somehow she felt she could not agree to them all at once. If he had taken her on his knee and told her them, constantly breaking off to hug and kiss her, she might have lingered on in her fool's paradise. But he had for the first time broken down in his part. Thinking perhaps the news in itself sufficient to satisfy her, he had announced it in the stilted language of one who had set himself a duty to perform instead of a labour of love. Lettice astonished him with a display of the old spirit, another memento of the early period of his courtship.

"So!" said she, "you think you have only to fix the day and I shall be content. But, like most women, I choose to be wooed before I am won, sir."

"What else," asked Tony aghast, "have I been doing all this while?"

"Pitying is not wooing, Tony; nursing is not wooing. You would have done the same to any girl circumstanced as I have been. I must have more than that. No, don't kiss me just now," she

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continued, pushing his face away, "but make ready for a test of your love. The real article would be proof against every test. If yours be that I will crave forgiveness on bended knee for having underestimated it."

"You have had every excuse," put in Tony penitently.

"And my love has thus undergone an ordeal far more searching than that I mean to put yours to. For, Tony, I shall love on even if you fail me now."

"Then all will be right," said her boastful swain.

"Oh! how I pray it may be. Now hear me, sweetheart. You have never asked why, please God never noticed, that I have not mentioned the Queen all this while. Well, I couldn't, because I knew something about her which might send you flying back to Paris."

"Go on!" said Tony, setting his teeth as men do when they prepare for an emergency.

"I am going to tell you this now. It is the test I mentioned."

"Never mind the test!" said Tony impatiently, and Lettice's heart sank.

"A monk came here whilst you were unconscious, one Friar Johannes. He let out that he was entrusted with a mission to set Mary and Suffolk by the ears."

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"In other words, undo all the good the King has done. Well, that's nothing, Friar Johannes was bound to fail," was her lover's careless comment.

"So I believed," said Lettice with a sigh of relief. "Then you won't require to go back to Paris?"

"Yes I shall," said Tony resolutely.

"Before we wed?" whispered Lettice, all the colour dying out of her cheeks.

"No," said Tony after a moment's hesitation, "we will undertake this last venture together as husband and wife if you choose. Aye, it will be better thus, better thus," he added dreamily.

"You forget," cried Lettice passionately, "but I mustn't—the test!"

Then Tony dropped his part altogether and said, "Be advised by me, Lettice, and omit the test."

"I see," she wailed, "I must not be too exacting." Then, with all her recently acquired humility, "Let them know, Tony dear, that the marriage will not take place."

"Not take place! why?"

"Because you and I will be on our way to Paris."

"Then you stick to the idea of this test?"

"No need to now; all that is left for me to do is to serve my Tony faithfully to the bitter end."

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"And may do so as my wife."

"That I shall never be, Tony."

"It rests with you. But is this second sight again, that you so surely presage the future?"

"I think it must be, Tony," and Lettice burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE MISSING JEWEL

THE three monks arrived in Paris to find the field clear of adversaries. Friar Johannes brought credentials from both the Papal and English Courts, and they were sufficient to procure him an introduction to the White Queen. Once before her eyes the charm of his personality ensured him a firm footing at the Hôtel de Clugny. It was natural rather than venial that Mary and her ladies should welcome this divine all the more heartily because of his innate gifts. Homilies from the tongue of the handsome friar seemed tinged with romance. His advice on womanly frailties was found to be as sensible as it was delicate. He was too fine a gentleman to shock modesty, too accomplished to offend good taste, too holy for what he had to say to be under-valued, and very soon he had constituted himself the Queen's Director. It was one day under benedi-

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cite that he swore by the Lord her paragon of virtue, Suffolk, had dealings with the Evil One. Mary was neither horrified nor indignant, but this astute man of the world saw at once that his venom had done more harm to himself than to his foe. He not only desisted from calumniating Suffolk, but pretended to be won over to a good opinion of him by Mary's praises. Only by unceasingly encouraging her to sing them did he save himself from actual dismissal. But he had lost much ground with the Queen, and now to render his errand more desperate still, Suffolk was not only in Paris, but had arrived in the train of Francis, with whom he seemed on terms of the closest intimacy. The fact that the friar still lingered in the French capital pointed to some fresh artifice and a far more ingenious one to boot. For, the arch enemy of the Norfolk faction had at once wrested from him the position of chief adviser at the Hôtel de Clugny. Indeed for a while Mary's self-appointed father confessor found it necessary to discontinue his visits there altogether. He, however, watched closely the march of events. Disguised in secular garb he attended the splendid ceremony of the King's coronation at St. Denys, beheld Mary's litter carried into the cathedral by a company of Suffolk's gentlemen, and became convinced by ocular proofs

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of the cordial relations now existing between Francis and his former rival.

Presently more disquieting news was brought him by his agents. He had many at his command —that is one of the advantages reaped by being a servant of the Holy Roman Empire. In every cloister of Paris significant conclusions were being drawn from the King's sudden liking for the lover of the Queen Dowager, and the information of the locutory, if staler than that of the wineshop, was far more to be relied on. So when in monastic circles they were prophesying a clandestine marriage between the late King's widow and the English ambassador, with Francis accessory to the fact, Friar Johannes thought seriously of going home. One idea detained him in Paris: the professed errand of Suffolk there was to negotiate for the disposal of Mary's dowry. So simple a matter, thought the friar, will not take long, and I may as well stop to see how it is settled. When he found himself still in the French capital after weeks and weeks of waiting he by no means repented of his decision. His spies had reported that a hitch in the proceedings had arisen, that somehow the English embassage had failed to come to terms with the statesmen of France, that Suffolk was going about with a long face, that the behaviour of the King towards

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him was less complaisant; in short, that his proposed secret marriage with the White Queen was no longer a likelihood. The countenance of Friar Johannes wore a sort of "I told you so" expression.

What had happened was this: Francis, in his new character of philanthropist, would have been hardly human if he had been able to suppress all signs of his mortification at Mary's preference for the handsome Englishman. He remained loyal to his undertaking, but had subjected it to a condition. The interests of his realm had to be considered as well as those of others. With sincere regret he was sorry to have to say that the wife of his Grace of Suffolk would have to restore the Crown jewels. Mary hesitated to do so, not because she coveted those costly ornaments, for she had always looked upon them as the price paid her for the sacrifice of marrying the late King. Moreover, she continued the careless practice of leaving them about her apartments which had so scandalised the Court in the days of her coverture. Even Friar Johannes had noticed this trait in her habits. Not that he had gone so far as to caution her against it, perhaps because he thought no amount of cautioning would be likely to prevail where a far stronger incentive to take good care of them existed. And this brings us back to the cause of her reluctance to restore

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them to the French crown. They constituted the only bribe she had to offer the King, her brother, for his consent to her marriage with Suffolk. Could Francis also have foreseen as much when making the demand? Brother Johannes acted on this assumption, and came out of his retirement.

His first visit to the Hôtel de Clugny was not a success: Mary refused to see him. His next was quite the reverse: Mary not only granted him an audience, but a most gracious one. That particular morning she would have scarcely refused to receive her worst enemy. She appeared before him as usual in white, but it was no longer the garb of mourning. Most of the disputed jewelry sparkled about her person. Not a stone was so brilliant as her blue eyes. If Friar Johannes was taken aback by all this unusual bravery; if he guessed that she had just parted with the enemy of the House of Howard no longer as a lover but as a husband; if he drew the conclusion that the dispute had been settled and she was wearing the Crown jewels for the last time, he did not show that he did. He only allowed himself to say that he had come to bid farewell, and forthwith performed the civility with the tact of a man of breeding combined with the solemnity of a servant of God. But in exchange for his blessing he took something far more worth

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having. Mary had turned to leave the room, and did not see his action. She had scattered her invaluable belongings around once too often. The friar hurried back to his lodgings and made ready for immediate departure. Before he and his myrmidons lost sight of the gay city they shook its dust off their sandals with a triumphant smile, strange gesture if their mission had been one of unmitigated failure.

It was probable that it had not been so, for on the very same morning, and scarcely two hours later, faces at the Hôtel de Clugny were wreathed in anything but smiles. The King was there, Suffolk also, but nobody else of his embassage. The pair was closeted with the White Queen. Outside in the anteroom, Roger, Ralph, and other gentlefolk belonging to the cause stood listening in dismay to the murmur of voices from the Queen's chamber, voices raised in tones of reprobation, voices lowered in deprecation, the King's words almost audible, the nature of Suffolk's only to be guessed at by their pleading accents, Mary's now indignant now expostulating. To this little band of devoted retainers it was no secret that Suffolk and Mary were now husband and wife. A few present had even been privileged to participate in the ceremony. All believed the King had been

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privy to it. And now on hearing his angry vociferations a thrill of apprehension shot through every leal heart in the anteroom.

What could have occurred to make him so irate? His estrangement at this vital issue might mean ruin to both their master and mistress. Had he, they were asking themselves, been only egging them on all the while to that final and irretrievable act so as to put them more completely at his mercy? Henry of England had yet to hear of this clandestine marriage, and Francis, it was always supposed, had taken upon himself the difficult task of averting his displeasure. Supposing he now refused? That would be tantamount to sentencing their lord to the block. Henry would not think twice about getting rid of an objectionable brother-in-law in that way. So when the door into the presence was opened and the King was ushered out by Suffolk, there was just such a stir amongst these persons as occurs in a herd of deer at sight of the hunter. The face of Francis was flushed with anger, that of the Duke with confusion. More depressing still was the glimpse caught of Mary's in the background. Every atom of colour had left it and a great tear was rolling down either cheek. Then Lord Suffolk drew back and closed the door, whilst the King strode past the startled retinue to

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the other exit giving on the stairs. Some one sprang forward to draw back the curtain for him. But before he could carry out the purpose, it yielded to another's touch on the reverse side, and the next instant Francis was face to face with two travel-stained individuals.

"Hah!" cried he, "the other pair of lovers at last. Maybe in your case, Master and Mistress Brandon, I shall not find all my trouble rewarded with perfidy. Tell me, do I address man and wife?"

Tony looked at Lettice and she at him, then Tony dropped on his knee before the King drawing Lettice down beside him. "Sire," said he, "all we wait for is your blessing."

"Pooh!" said the King, "don't tell me that it has been for this you put off the ceremony?"

Again Tony sought inspiration from his companion, and again she disappointed him. "Under favour, Sire," said he, "we only waited for the others to set us the example."

"*Peste!*" said Francis bitterly, "I hope you are not going to follow their example throughout. But if you only mean you declined to wed until you became sure of my being in earnest over that other match, you may go off to church foot hot. How now, mistress?" added he with a sharp look at Lettice, "your face says No to that!"

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This time it was Lettice's turn to look at Tony, but he kept silence with his eye fixed on the King.

"Come, what is the difficulty?" cried Francis impatiently. "I tell you Suffolk and Mary are man and wife, and all you do is to stare at me. What else must I say?"

"Pardon, Sire," said Tony, "you spoke of the other happy pair as requiting your generous services with ingratitude."

"Perfidy was the word I used," corrected the King, "you English are a perfidious race."

"I would like to leave a better impression of us if I could."

"*Foi de gentilhomme!* You are the only one of the race here meet for the task. But even you will find it hard. Nevertheless pass on in there, and learn at its fount the scurvy trick to which I have been alluding." And Francis with no unkindly nod to the lovers pursued his way downstairs.

Next moment Tony and Lettice were the centre of a group of their admirers.

Their story had become universally known, and the romance of it ensured them an interested welcome, their devotion to Suffolk and Mary a warm one. Yet for two persons about to join in

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the close relationship of holy wedlock their behaviour to one another, was, to say the least of it, unusual. Tony, once more in the presence of his countrymen, bore himself towards Lettice with a rigid courtesy, and the reserve of the girl, even during the few moments she spent in the anteroom, became conspicuous. Ralph and Roger broke off in the midst of their congratulations to puzzle over the phenomenon, and indeed a sense of constraint fell upon the entire assemblage. On none more than on Tony and Lettice, who felt relieved when they found themselves in the quieter atmosphere of the royal presence, especially as they did not expect Suffolk and Mary to be in a state of mind to notice them closely. Nevertheless for other reasons they were ill at ease. Poor Lettice had followed her lover in with a heart of lead. Once more he was to come in contact with the fascinating personality of her rival, and the thought made her shrink from the warm-hearted reception which Mary accorded her. As for Tony, he knew that he was to put his late resolution to the very test that Lettice had prepared for it. Fully alive to its severity he had tried to reconcile her to marriage as a preliminary, believing if he thus, so to speak, sank his ships beforehand, he would be most likely to come out of the ordeal in safety. His only

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object in undergoing it had been to make sure that Mary was really about to consummate her union with Suffolk. When Francis told him that this had already come to pass he found he might have spared himself and Lettice the painful experience. It was then too late to recede; besides, the King had hinted at some fresh trouble menacing the Queen, and Tony was as resolved as ever to be sure of her lasting felicity before he surrendered the championship of her interests. Such ideas as these passed through his mind on entering the Royal chamber and guided his actions. One look at Mary, and that in response to her words of welcome, was all he allowed himself. Then he turned to Suffolk and intimated respectfully that he desired the favour of a few words in private with him. Thus it came about that the Queen had time to learn of Lettice all her adventures, and Suffolk the opportunity to describe the nature of the new anxiety.

"Faithful kinsman," said he in response to Tony's eager request to hear the news, "even your bold and willing mind will be of no use here."

"The King is still jealous?" suggested Tony.

"Not in the least. Francis has done with love and talks now as if he were a Paris goldsmith. The Queen's dowry is the bone of

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contention. It seems all has not been given up that should be. Some gem they call the Miroir de Naples is not forthcoming—lost or stolen we fear. Forty thousand crowns—for that is its worth—are all that interpose between me now and death on Tower Hill."

"How can that be, your Grace? Our friends in England are many, and would raise double that sum to save you."

"Friendship, kinsman, you have yet to learn must not be rated too high. Besides, it is the Crown jewel, not its value in money, that Francis demands, and unless every stone in the Queen's dowry be returned he threatens to hand me over to Henry. These are his terms—the Miroir de Naples or—my head."

"Have you no idea how it has gone astray, my lord? Stay! there came a monk here with a mission to work you ill, Lord Norfolk's tool—you understand?"

"Yes, I know all about Friar Johannes. He was a blunt tool at best, and did me more good than harm."

"Not if he stole the gem!"

"By the mass! you have, perchance, solved the mystery. But see, your companion, Mistress Lettice there, is faint!" and Suffolk scarcely

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sprang forward in time to save her from falling.

"What have you been talking about?" cried the Queen, "the poor girl suddenly turned a deaf ear to all I was saying, grew pale as these snow-drops, and kept glancing over her shoulder at this graceless swain of hers as if she heard him plotting love's treason."

"I only spoke of our difficulties," replied Suffolk; "the loss of that jewel cannot affect the lady."

"It was the mention of Friar Johannes which set her swooning. Why, I fail to understand;" and Mary stopped fanning the unconscious girl to look up to Tony for an answer.

Then only was it discovered that he had left the room. Poor Lettice! her test had been too severe after all. Without stopping to see if she were in a swoon or worse, carried so to speak off his legs by the idea that he might be of further use to the other woman, he had stolen away and was now hurrying through the streets to the lodging of the three monks. Of course he did not find them at home, never expected to, was even prepared for a denial of all knowledge of such individuals, and before interrogating the woman who answered the door had taken care to produce the paper on which

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Friar Johannes had scribbled his address. On the assumption that he was a confederate of her late lodgers, the doorkeeper furnished him with all the information of which she was possessed. It transpired that they had taken their departure only a few hours before, and Tony pressed on to the North Gate of the city. Here he experienced his first check. Nobody answering to his description had passed that way he was told by the gate-wards. Baffled, but not defeated, he bent his steps to the Porte St. Antoine, for whilst coming along he had been puzzling over the cause of Lettice's indisposition, and had arrived at a highly plausible solution of the problem. If Friar Johannes had purloined the jewel, then Friar Johannes and he would have to meet again. That was what his sweetheart must have foreboded. But where? Apparently the dream had arranged it all. Could it really be that he was destined to stand once more on that bridge over the Marne where he had stood talking to the girl with the pail, only this time to accost a monk with a jewel? A few minutes' walk would satisfy him if there was any reliance to be placed on the nightmare of a sick girl, and he was now on his way to the Porte St. Antoine.

Fast though he went, faster coursed ideas through

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his brain. "If I wanted help in this venture," soliloquised he, "I should only have to go to Francis and he would lend me a band of armed men. But this is a trouble which touches England's honour, and by Englishmen only shall it be righted. Ralph and Roger, what about them?" he next asked himself. "No, last time they failed me; this time only my own self shall be able to do that." As for the foe, Tony did the unwise act of underestimating their prowess. "Three shavelings, pshaw!" muttered he, "I am a match any day for a cloister full!" He would not even delay to procure a horse, so dazzled had he become by a picture of the future, wherein his own form and nobody's else save Mary's was visible—hers in the act of receiving at his hands the stolen gem, and with it the final consummation of her bliss. On ascertaining at the Eastern Gate that his quarry had passed that way a few hours previously, he, like them, gave expression to his feelings on leaving the gay treacherous capital.

Odd that it should be the other woman of whom he thought now, but so it happened. "Remain there, poor Lettice," said he to himself, "you will take no harm amongst all those powerful friends. Only wait patiently and in a few days I shall be back. Then, 'fore Heaven I say it, I will make it

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all up to you in the way brother Ralph would have had me to do!"

It is to be feared it was not with the purpose of diminishing Lettice's spell of waiting that he forthwith pushed on more strenuously than ever, insomuch as by midnight to be approaching the forest where stood the Marne mill. How different his feelings on this occasion from the last! Then he had been weary and despondent, now he was in a fever of expectancy which hardly suffered him to dismount for a moment to examine the track. He was fully rewarded for so doing by distinguishing in the soft sward the print of sandals. If all along he had felt some slight misgivings as to the wisdom of basing so grave an undertaking on a foundation so frail as a girl's delirious fancies, now they had vanished. The discovery that the monks had really preferred this circuitous route to Calais was only what he had been hoping for leagues back. Neither was the alternative route chosen by them unexpected. Strangers to the country as they were, they would be sure to give the preference to the only other with which they were familiar. But why, it may be asked, had Tony been hoping for this manœuvre? Because it pointed to their being fearful of pursuit, and men who had walked off with one of the Crown jewels had good reason

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to be so. The prospective scene on the bridge appeared to Tony nearer than ever. Somewhere or other the Marne had now to be crossed before the monks hit the direct road north, and the nearest passage was the bridge in question.

"If only I had insisted on hearing the whole of the dream," was Tony's one regret as he struck into the path along the river and began to look out for the deserted mill.

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CHAPTER XX

THE LAST SERVICE

Tony had not been expecting to catch up the enemy before they reached their first night's lodging. Indeed he was rather relieved than otherwise not to have done so, the speed at which they were travelling being a further proof of their dread of pursuit. He would, however, have been woefully disappointed to find the mill untenanted, and his first glimpse of it was not reassuring. The night was starlit, the hour when all Nature is in a state of hushed expectancy of another day's activity. Even the backwater of the Marne appeared to flow less boisterously than usual, and in the forest hardly a twig stirred. He had been scanning the façade of the haunted building in hopes of seeing, if not a light in its windows, at least smoke rising above the roof, No such signs of human occupancy met his eyes, and with a sinking heart he stole cautiously over the planks which spanned the chasm of water

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separating the mill from the mainland, popped his head round the corner only to draw it back with a jerk. Posted sentry before the porch was a tall white figure which, if seen by any of the villagers, would have established for ever the hanged miller's reputation for "walking."

Evidently Friar Johannes was on the alert, and Tony rapidly weighed the pros and cons of instant action. Should he rush on and close with the man at once, or should he continue to follow the guidance of Lettice's dream? Impatience argued one way, superstition the other; it was the latter which prevailed. He felt under the influence of some esoteric power, and could not bring himself to run counter to its promptings. No, he would stand on that bridge at the exact moment when Lettice beheld him there in her sleep, and wait for whatever the immortals held in store for him. This decision involved inaction for three long hours, and the only circumstance which made them endurable was the being within touch of the prey. He was neither hungry nor sleepy; nevertheless he husbanded his vital energies as well as circumstances would permit. It was a time of year when winter and summer meet as it were to exchange experiences. During the day the air had been balmy; now there was a sting in it which drove him to shelter. Close to

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where he stood was a lean-to shed into which he crept and took his seat at an opening in the wall abutting on the yard, whence he could still watch the enemy. Every time Friar Johannes stamped his feet or cleared his throat Tony started out of a reverie and had a peep at him. Once he caught him examining something in his hand. Could it be the Miroir de Naples? Tony nearly dislocated his neck in his efforts to discern the object.

As time passed he became more excited. He had rehearsed *ad nauseam* his course of action; believed he had reckoned with every possible contingency, and felt sure that the most probable had been provided for with infallible precision. He was counting on the monks making an early start in the same dim light as when he had set out to procure nursing and nourishment for Lettice. Directly they were out of sight he meant to cross the backwater of the Marne and take a route parallel to theirs. Often during his long detention with Lettice he had used this path for exercise, was therefore familiar with its windings and obstructions, and could count to a moment the time it would take him to arrive at the bridge. He pictured himself lurking behind a tree at the fateful spot long before his quarry reached it, his sudden rush to meet them

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midway across the river, and every word and act that would ensue. He did not foresee having recourse to violence; so far from killing these monks he hoped to part at last as courteous adversaries who have settled their differences. He should not forget that he owed his life to Friar Johannes, but he would run no risks of losing his prize from any feeling of forbearance on that account.

He had grown sick with suspense before the moment for action arrived, and strange anomaly, so often seen in human nature, when it did arrive it found him unprepared. He might have eaten for the last three hours; only when one of the other monks came out with the friar's breakfast did he remember that he ought not to set out on so serious a business faint from fasting. Now Father Johannes had begun to bolt his food like a man in a hurry, so Tony, setting the clock of his stomach by that of his opponent, gobbled up the contents of his provision wallet with like expedition. Both men were still munching their last mouthful when the reappearance of the other two monks, equipped for the road proved the signal for an immediate start. Then indeed Tony's heart beat fast and furiously as he waited to see the line they would take. Finding that it was the one to the bridge, he set his cap firmly on his head, hitched his sword an inch to the

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front, and hardly allowed the three forms to wax indistinct in the distance before he was off himself. Presently pursuer and pursued were stepping out along either bank of the Marne backwater.

Another anxious moment for Tony was when he stood behind the tree in close vicinity to the bridge. He did not want witnesses of the scene that was to ensue, because, after all, he might be compelled to use violence, and though such old acquintances as these villagers would be sure to put the kindliest construction on his actions, they might for his own sake interfere to prevent him from committing murder. But nobody was about as yet, and thus far reassured Tony brought his whole mind to bear on a worse eventuality. The bridge he perceived was only broad enough for the monks to pass in single file ; and, therefore, if the possessor of the jewel should not be the foremost, he might find time to cast it into the river. Tony hoped that the enormous value of the gem might save it from this fate. But even this poor consolation vanished when he reflected that the motive for the theft had not been avarice but political. In short, Tony found himself face to face with a contingency he had not come prepared to meet, and Lettice's dream no longer helped because he had reached the point

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where she had broken off its narration. But fortune still petted him. The enemy appeared in sight with the Augustinian leading. He came onward with a swift gliding movement, ten strides ahead of the next man, his voice raised in jocose tones, maybe on the subject of his coming audience with the Duke his master, for Norfolk's name caught Tony's ear. The man was so full of his subject that he set foot on the bridge with his face over his shoulder to catch his comrades' laughter. Midway he turned it to behold Tony disputing the passage sword in hand. Like lightning Friar Johannes plucked the diamond out of his bosom and held it over the stream. Then Tony's shout made him think twice before parting with it in that manner.

"Drop it and I thrust," he cried, and "Ugh!" grunted the monk, at the same time recoiling at the sight of Tony's point at his throat. But in an instant he regained his self-possession and stood his ground. The expressions of both men were now equally grim. If the friar breathed a trifle quicker so did Tony: there was, in fact, nothing to choose between them in point of coolness.

Brother Johannes spoke never a word, Tony only two. "The jewel" said he holding out the disengaged hand for it.

"Ah!" said Brother Johannes, and as if to tan-

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talise him made it sparkle in the sun well out of his reach.

"Quick!" said Tony sharply, shortening his sword.

"What if I refuse?" asked Friar Johannes.

"You die!" answered Tony with ferocious fervour.

"How about a compromise? suppose the Marne was to receive the prize?"

"You die!" repeated the obdurate Tony with his point now pricking the other's flesh.

"It is not worth that. But what is to follow its surrender?"

"We part in peace."

"*Pax vobiscum*, my son!" said Johannes, putting it in his adversary's hand.

Tony pressed it to his lips as if it had been some sacred relic, then his fingers closed tightly over the coveted possession, and with that stately bow of his, he turned to walk off the bridge. There was a swift powerful movement from behind; whereon both the jewel and its rescuer were down under the Marne's surface.

"Alas for our trophy of victory," quoth Friar Johannes, "but victory itself remains," then, as he watched his victim come gasping up and strike out for the shore, "See, I" he added, "the poor fool

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does not realise that all is over with him. So run, *fratres*, one to this bank, the other to that, and strike him dead with your knives if he venture within reach," and the speaker drew himself together in as small a compass as possible to enable his nearest ally to pass.

The order had been given intentionally loud enough for Tony to hear, and setting his teeth together he began to strike out down stream, the current aiding and abetting his efforts. Friar Johannes was equal to this fresh stratagem; he girded up his frock, sped to land and ran like a greyhound ahead of his victim. The mill, a quarter of a mile distant, was now everybody's goal. The two black monks walked leisurely thither abreast of the drowning man on either bank, dagger in hand. Their superior reached it full five minutes the soonest, vanished within, reappeared a moment later with a mallet, hurried to the brink of the mill-waste and began to hammer down its water-gate. Gradually the waste was shut off, until the full flood of the Marne backwater roared and bubbled through the archway of the race. The friar was now sweating all over and gasping for breath, so he paused an instant to recover and at the same time snatched a glance at his prey. Tony was already in the suck of the race, and had given up swimming.

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One other act and his body would never reappear to tell ugly tales. With this idea in his head Friar Johannes ran back into the mill, grasped with both hands the windlass of the water-wheel, once, twice, thrice tried to turn the handle and failed; again, and this time threw into the effort will as well as strength until the muscles in his bare arms stood out like knots of rope and his teeth met in his flesh. Then, with many groans, as though reluctant to become Tony's executioner, the huge wheel slowly revolved. Pit-wheel and spur-wheel took up the motion above, until all of a sudden everything stopped. Friar Johannes wiped the perspiration from his forehead and began in a solemn voice to intone the office for the dead; his confederates joined in the responses, breeze and water formed the orchestra, and some doves in the trees cooed a requiem.

Lettice's first act on recovering her senses was to inquire for Tony. There was only the Queen present to answer her, and she did not know whither her lover was gone. Suffolk might have guessed, but he was already with the King imparting Tony's suspicions about the monks. When Francis heard them he despatched a knight and his squires after these worthies. But of what good

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was that? They might have hunted up the North road as far as the march of English territory, and yet come back without either them or the diamond. Suffolk had only wasted valuable time in thus absenting himself at the crucial moment of Lettice's recovery. When he returned and found her still in anxiety about her lover he realised as much. Could Tony have taken the hasty departure he did for the purpose of rushing off in pursuit of the monks? At least it was worth inquiring if he were still in Paris, and he despatched a messenger on that errand. When the man brought back the news that Tony had been seen last at the Porte St. Antoine, Suffolk consoled himself with the idea that his faithful kinsman was also on the track of the missing jewel. He said as much in the presence of the Queen and Lettice. The former expressed the hope that her lady's lover would be soon back. Lettice felt a sickening sensation at her heart but she made no sign. She would go to her room, she said, and wait tidings of the missing man there. On receiving the desired permission, however, she did something quite different, namely ran downstairs to Tony's brothers and startled them no less by the vehemence than by the import of her utterances.

"Shame on you!" she cried, "for resting idle

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here when your brother is speeding to his death."

"To his death?" they cried simultaneously, springing to their feet.

"Aye, saddle horses, one for me as well, mind. Oh, haste, haste, haste!"

They wanted something more definite to act upon, but she fairly drove them out of doors. Deeply impressed by her excitement, and never the men to stand on ceremony, they burst into the stables of the Hôtel de Clugny, and laid hands on the best horses in the Queen's stud, Mary's pet palfrey for Lettice, two of the fastest stallions for themselves. Such was now their trusted position at the Hôtel that not a varlet dared to gainsay their wishes. So presently Paris saw the last of the Brandons, and it was a departure in keeping with all their transactions there, that is to say, fast and furious.

In gasps and sobs Lettice related her fears as they sped along. "Only a dream after all!" they might have exclaimed, but her manner far more than her words impressed them, and presently Roger forged ahead and disappeared, then the heavier Ralph. She neither asked nor desired that they should tarry for her, only whipped her beast as it had never been whipped before. All

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through the night they galloped with loosened rein and busy spur, so that the sun had not long risen when Roger reached the mill. The little man flung himself off his horse, and, with his heart in his mouth, sword in his fist, dashed into the deserted building hoping to kill somebody or other, at least expecting to be in time to revenge. No signs of life or death met his eye. Not a shred or a token of Tony's late presence there rewarded his first hurried examination. All appeared just as it had been on that last visit save that the stream entered the mill-tail through the race instead of the waste, and that circumstance told no story

He began to think he had come on a wild goose chase, and took to watching the road back for the first appearance of his brother. Then feeling that after all something dreadful might have happened he ran in doors once more to make sure he had left no crook or cranny unsearched. He was rewarded for his pains at last. In the shed where Tony had passed those hours of waiting he picked up a handkerchief, a delicate piece of laced cambric, into a corner of which an "M" had been embroidered. The White Queen's initial letter! She at least had not been there, but one who loved her might have been. If so he must have been labouring under some powerful emotion to have

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left so great a treasure behind. Thus far had Roger reasoned when Ralph rode up.

"Well?" shouted the newcomer.

"No signs as yet except this one," and Roger held up the kerchief.

Ralph made a gesture of impatience. "Poor Tony!" said he, "infatuated to the last. Whither has his passion for the Queen carried him now?"

It seemed no good to search the mill once more for an answer, and after a short consultation Roger remounted and rode on to the village to see if any one there knew aught of the missing man, whilst Ralph stayed behind to meet Lettice. Half-an-hour elapsed and then the poor girl appeared. She was almost past the power of speech with combined fatigue and suspense, but she managed to gasp out "Not here! the bridge! on, on!"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders to imply the uselessness of further pursuit, nevertheless to humour her he began to make ready to go. Then the sudden foundering of the exhausted palfrey put an end to their intention. There was now nothing for it but to wait patiently for Roger's return. Ralph confessed afterwards that never in his life had he passed such a time of horror. His companion seemed beside herself with gloomy forebodings. She met his proposal to enter the mill

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and rest there with a shudder, and seating herself beside the worn-out palfrey hid her face in her hands as though she wanted to keep out some ghastly spectacle. The sound of Roger riding back aroused her, and she got up and ran to meet him. A village boy was perched on the saddle in front of him, crying and struggling. Roger's stern white face spoke volumes, and as soon as he beheld Lettice advancing he waved her fiercely from him. Thereupon Ralph went after Lettice and compelled her to come back with him. "Go in," said Ralph sternly, pushing her before him into the mill doorway.

"No, no," said she, at the same time resisting with all her might.

"Oh, take her away, Ralph," groaned Roger, who was now dismounted in the yard, with his hand firmly fixed on the collar of the struggling lad.

"Do you think," she said, "I don't know the worst? I have known it all along."

"Let her stay," said Ralph, and stepped aside to allow her to pass him.

Then a sudden silence fell upon the little group; even the child seemed momentarily awed into dumbness, Tony's brothers kept fidgeting uneasily, his sweetheart, though ghastly white, was now the most composed of all.

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"Boy," said Roger huskily, "tell them what you saw."

But he only broke out again into sobs and struggles, mingled with entreaties to be allowed to get further away from the ill-famed building, and then Lettice went up to him and soothed his fears until at last she drew out the whole story.

"He is down there, then," said she pointing a shaking finger to where the race raged through the apertures of the water-wheel. "Ralph, Roger, we must have him up!"

"Oh prithee, Lettice," pleaded Ralph, "not that. What good can it do?"

"No good to me or you. But I think of him. It is all the pleasure I have yet had in my life; it is all the pleasure I shall ever have now."

"But it is down under the wheel" (the "it" was horribly suggestive). "For God's sake don't disturb him."

"Why?" asked Roger in a whisper.

"Every bone will be crushed."

"But not the jewel," cried Lettice overhearing the remark. "I know my Tony better than you do. He would hold it even in death. And Tony, darling, you shall not have died in vain."

They got him up somehow, and found that Lettice had been right. The Miroir de Naples

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went back to Francis, who threw it away with an oath, exclaiming that he had lost over its recovery a jewel a thousand times more precious—the jewel of a true heart; and as a last act of homage to it, he perfected its life's aims—that is to say, made Mary's and Suffolk's peace with Henry of England.

As for that heart itself, the curé who undertook to unite it with that of Lettice, buried it instead in the forest churchyard.

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